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The Rental Shop

Owner

By

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[ENG TRANS] 租書店老闆 BY 軒轅懸

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Excerpt

I think that was the moment when everything started to change.

I don't know why but I had never liked anyone in all those years. Even though I liked men, I had never taken a liking to any.

I thought it was out of sympathy and pity at that time.

But someone once said that love stemming from sympathy and pity is actually more down-to-earth. I think it was Zheng Zhihua⁰ talking about his wife.

⁰ Zheng Zhihua is a Taiwanese singer who is paralysed from the waist down.

Prologue

*M*y university arranged a job for me at an agricultural

experimentation centre after graduation. The pay was fifty bucks¹ a month. I quit after not being able to feed myself. But what could I do?

I went to a few career fairs but agricultural parasite majors were not exactly the most attractive group.

I had driven trucks for a while and I was utterly wiped every single day. My family were concerned too. I was the only child, after all.

I had opened an apparel store. I thought that my selection was unique in town (albeit a very small town), but I had little customers and even ended up owing my dad, who was about to retire, over two thousand dollars.

I had opened a bakery. Everyone who came in said it was yummy. It was just that there weren't many who came in.

In the end, with my back against the wall, I brought out my entire prized collection and opened a little video and book rental shop. My taste that I was very proud of finally worked its magic and business was booming, so much so that several nearby stores had to close down and relocate.

My dad and mom could finally let out a breath of relief. Although their only son was still far from what they had hoped for, I was finally making enough to keep myself alive. Afterwards, all that was left was continuing the lineage.

Regarding this issue, I was destined to disappoint them. I had already known since puberty that I was a man who did not like women.

I did not like women but I hadn't planned to date men either. In my opinion, dating was like drugs. If you do it once, then there will be a second time and then a third time and then it's addiction; it's disaster. And one day the beans would be spilled. My dad was already thirty six when I was born. I couldn't let an old fellow like him get shamed on by others.

Of course, I understood that homosexuality is not perverse—it's just different. But in others' eyes, homosexuality was no different from perversion, am I right?

All in all, I lived a simple life. I didn't feel that I couldn't live without sex.

But humans cannot win against nature.

¹ Calculated at the rate of 1 USD = 8 RMB in 1997.

Chapter 01

The shop opened late even during the Lunar New Year's season when everyone else was off on holiday. It was the third day of the first lunar month and a cold, snowy day. I didn't want to go out after closing the shop at ten o'clock so I decided to sleep there.

I was watching *Legend of the Fall* and mumbling about Brad's six-pack when I dozed off. Someone started knocking in the middle of the night and woke me from my light sleep.

It was unusual so I asked, "Who is it?"

The knocking continued but no one answered. My stomach did a little uneasy flip. I got dressed and went to the door, opening the door a tiny crack.

The moment I opened it, a person barged in.

A tall guy wearing a sterile mask and wrapped in a scarf and down jacket stood in my shop, scolding me with a glaring look in his eyes. "Aren't we the daredevil, opening doors in the middle of the night? You ain't got nine lives!"

Seeing him fling his clothes away, the retort I was about to make got stuffed back down my throat. All I could see underneath the jacket were bloody bandages.

Nonchalantly, he lied down on my clean metal cot, muttering. "I have a fever." By the time I comprehended it, he was already unconscious.

I was at a complete loss.



I told you that I had led a simple life; I did not want women or men. He, well, he was younger than me and was still a little thug out and about on the streets just three years ago. He kept coming to my shop to borrow videos. He had bad taste and also never paid. But he was a leader of the local scene nonetheless, and I wasn't one to bother with kids anyways.

Winter of 1997, he came running into my shop, asking me, “Yo, you got any movies with Leslie Cheung in it?”

I looked up from the screen playing *Lethal Weapons of Love and Passion*. One glance at him almost made me cough out last night's dinner—oily, wax-yellow hair with a tuft in the front dyed green and purple, a fake gold earring on the left ear, a pair of coffee brown sunglasses, a fake black leather jacket, a metal-studded belt and an unbelievably fat pair of red pants.

Disgusted, I asked, “Which do you want?”

“That fag one, of course!”

I was very repulsed. I knew he was talking about *Happy Together*, which was the best gay film I had ever seen. Although I didn't count as a legitimate queer, I did feel disgusted when people called gay people fags. But what could I say to garbage like him?

Still disgusted, I spat, “I don't have any! Take this. *Sex and Zen*. It's got Shu Qi, Chingmy Yau, see—”

“You fuckin' deaf? You got what I want or not?”

Your mother fucking has it, I swore in my head.

“Yes.”

“Hehe, knew you got all the goodies. Bet you’ve seen it already too.” He stuck his disgusting yellow and purple coloured, sticky-looking hair in my face. It smelled like cheap hair gel.

I crinkled my nose, “Nothing special,” and said no more.

Sullenly, he left with the disk. As expected, that copy of *Happy Together* did not return.

Some days later, he showed up again. “Yo, you got anymore? The ones with homo Cheung if you can.”

I clenched my teeth before flashing a smile. “I wonder why you always watch them.” I took a full look at him. His face was nicely proportioned but he was just another bony teenager going through puberty.

“Hehe...” I snickered meaningfully.

“Whatchu laughin’ at?” He shot up and glared at me with a pair of disgruntled eyes like a vulture. It made my hairs stand up.

What was with that reaction?!

But there was one thing I could stand about that piece of garbage—his eyes. Aside from the disgruntled look that he had acquired, they were a pair of pitch black and bottomless eyes.

I wiped my smile off and stopped fooling around. “This one, right? Just take it.” I tossed the American gay film towards him since I didn’t expect it back anyways.

What really infuriated me was when he nicked my entire private collection one day. The rascal rummaged through my cash drawer while I went to take a piss. *Farewell My Concubine*: this was thin on the ground back in ’98 and was brought by someone all the way from Guangzhou; *The Wedding Banquet* starring Winston Chao; *Cheap Killers* (not *Hold You Tight*²) starring Alex Fong; *Total Eclipse*, the best DiCaprio film; and the

three Japanese dramas I had spent a fortune on, *Dousoukai*, *Ningen Shikkaku: If I Were to Die* and *Kira Kira Hikaru*; and...

He took them all.

Now that I think about it, QAF was everywhere. There was nothing special about my stuff.

He slapped my back before he left and made faces at me. I did my best to keep it together, telling myself: amiability brings riches, amiability brings riches, amiability brings riches...that motherfucker. He just had to take my gay films. As if they were easy to get my hands on!

After a while, the damn jerk strode into my shop again after the Lunar New Year's holidays.

I was stupid and quickly hugged my drawer close.

"What're ya doin'? I look like a thief to ya?" The hoodlum rolled his eyes at me with a cigarette between his teeth.

"Your stash was pretty sweet!" He flashed a flattering smile right after the eye-rolling. "You got anymore? Hmm?"

Ew. Disgusting. What the hell was he smoking?

More smoke ended up coming out of his stinking mouth.

"Hey-!" Then I broke out coughing.

"Mwahahaha!" He began laughing at me exaggeratedly.

Everyone has their limits.

And I always saw these crooks as eyesores.

So I pointed my nose up in the air. "You're not welcome here. Please leave right now."

Ahem. I admit I was pretty harsh. He still makes fun of me about it until this day.

The hoodlum shot me a glance before plopping onto the table without a care in the world and even started flipping through my rental records and reading out loud.

“Zhang Hua³ rented *Ghost*...”

He misread several characters and even licked his fingers to flip the pages.

I froze in place as flames of fury sparked within and rose above my head. I understood then what it meant to be driven mad.

I carefully set the drawer down and shoved the useless piece of shit off the table.

“Get the fuck out!” I roared.

He didn’t pay any heed and kept teetering.

I was a man. Although I wasn’t as hot-blooded as Mister Lu Xun hoped our countrymen to be, I was still a man.

Thus, without much consideration, I punched him.

Actually, as a cultured person, I usually never lost my temper. I could count all the fights I had in twenty four years with one hand. He had not done anything evil or unforgivable and there were not any hate based on our social classes, but I was just so angry.

Sometimes, one punch leads to a life of complications for two.

He was 180 centimetres tall, about half a head taller than me. Though he looked malnourished, he was apparently very experienced. My fury went into hiding once more after dealing two punches and taking four of his. I had knocked one of his teeth out since my first punch landed on his mouth—which I wasn’t told until much later—and that truly angered him. We fought like there was no tomorrow. Disks were cracked and shelves were tipped over. The thunderous racket brought over a crowd of curious people.

What they saw was the mild-tempered Qian Jr. beaten bloody by some thug, the popular Qian Jr. getting his store wrecked by a hoodlum lowlife.

I don't know what happened after that: I got knocked out. What a joke. A twenty-four-year-old man getting knocked unconscious by an eighteen-year-old kid.

I was the Qian family's only child. My uncle's son-in-law's second brother worked in the police station in the East District and the scoundrel was arrested on the day of the incident. My dear mother told me this when I woke up in the hospital that night.

"...wouldn't have let you if I knew opening a book store would get you beat up...I told you not to..." My sixty-year-old ma could barely breathe through the sobbing. "It's all your old man's fault...making you apply for that stupid agriculture university. If only you listened to me..."

I felt guilty. This is going to be the last time that I make you worried, I promised silently.

My head still didn't feel too well so I stayed another day.

I was on the hospital cot, drinking the dates, white fungus and lotus seed soup my mom made me and skimming through *Slam Dunk*.

"Hahaha!" Hanamichi Sakuragi was really adorable but I still liked Mitsui the best.

"Excuse me..." A small, skinny woman appeared by my bed. I was certain I didn't know her. She had a very thick layer of foundation on her face which still couldn't hide the thin creases all over her skin. She was probably close to my mom's age. I only knew afterwards that she was only in her early forties.

"Are you Comrade⁴ Qian Jiying?"

I frowned. Apparently Jiying was the name of a famous poet from our hometown in the imperial times and my self-crowned, learned intellectual father named me after him. But I'm Qian Jiying, not Comrade Qian Jiying.

"What can I do for you?" I asked kindly.

A giant bag of bananas and apples popped out of nowhere. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m Shen Bin’s mom. He shouldn’t have fought with you. I didn’t do a good job raising him. Sorry...”

So the rascal’s name is Shen Bin, I thought. I was nowhere as furious after the fight.

“I’m sorry but I don’t have anything else I could give you other than these fruits. Shen Bin’s still young. He’s only going to turn nineteen after the next New Year’s. I’d hoped that he’d amount to something. They said he started a fight in your shop and broke lots of things and even hurt you. I know I have to pay but I really don’t have any money. I’ll educate him in the future, I promise. He’s already in jail now. I just hope you can find in your heart...”

I wonder how a tiny woman like her could raise such a tough son. Honestly, I did not want to make a fuss over it too much. He was a kid after all and I was the one who started it.

“You don’t have to pay. But there’s no use in begging me. I’m not the one who arrested your son.”

The old lady puckered her lips and almost burst out in tears. I never liked seeing women cry so I hurriedly said, “Come on, it’s okay. He’ll be released in a couple of days. It’ll be fine!”

Her old, teary face made me feel so sorry for her and even a bit regretful. I wondered to myself if the rascal would learn his lesson this time.

She took out another bag after wiping off the tears on the powder. “I know he broke the videos in your store. I found these in his room. I’ll try looking again when I go—.”

I had just taken the bag from her when my ma came in like the Tasmanian devil. “How dare you show your face around here? Probably thought our sweetie’s easy to fool, didn’t you? Your thug of a son is gonna

end up in jail sooner or later, I tell you. If anything happens to my son, that piece of shit is gonna be dead meat! Now, get the hell outta here!”

The woman left unkemptly in a hurry with her fruits.

I frowned as my mom started on me. “Don’t you be nice now. You almost got beaten to death! What are we gonna do if you died, son? Hmmpf. She thinks a few apples is all it takes? How funny!”

By then, I was already regretful. I felt really sorry for Shen Bin’s mom.

I opened the bag. There were approximately forty or fifty disks in there. My entire collection.

“Don’t you be fooled by her appearance now. She used to be that little widow up the street. Tons of lovers. They say bitches raise sons of bitches, and they’re darn right about that. Don’t you start feeling sorry for her.”

Sigh. I guess even the kindest mother would become a witch when it came to her son.

There were other stuff in the bag aside from my disks: *The Longest Nite*, *Young and Dangerous*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Sting*, *Sniper*...even *Rouge*, *Centre Stage*, and *Three Colours*.

My collection had not been lying abandoned in the trash but rather, they were perfectly fine. I was quite dumbfounded.

My old lady was still grumbling, “Gotta make sure he goes behind the bars...”

“Let’s forget it.”

“But son!”

Only after my persistent pleading did my family decide to go easy on Shen Bin.

However, my brother-in-law’s second brother came back saying that the rascal had the guts to beat the living daylights out of the big fellow that was locked up with him on his second night at the detention centre, breaking three ribs, blinding one eye and almost rupturing the spleen.

I gasped out loud. My so-called injuries were nothing compare to those. Why was he so misbehaved though? He wasn't going to get out easily after something like that.

I opened shop again in a couple of days, alive and kicking.

I had just opened for business when these little scoundrels dressed like thugs showed up at my door. "Qian! You won this time wit' your dirty tricks! Disrespectin' Shen Bin like that...just you wait!"

What tricks? I was puzzled

"Don't play innocent with me. E'eryone knows what that motherfuckin' Ol' Wu does. You Qians sure are cold!"

Then they left after not being able to do anything in broad daylight.

I smelled something fishy so I went to ask the second brother.

He hesitantly told me after my interrogation, "We were thinking the fellow didn't behave, plus he had beat Qian Jr. up, so, um, we put him with Old Wu 'cause we thought, you know, but who knew he'd be that ballsy? Old Wu is one big guy. You should've seen that giant being beaten to a pulp..."

I glared at him.

"Hey buddy, your mom was the one who asked me!"

I continued to glare at him.

"Kay, fine. I heard Old Wu's done *that* kind of stuff before, but I didn't know about it beforehand. I ain't that wicked. I really didn't know!"

"What kind of stuff?"

"You know, the usual. They say he did a few little boys before." He patted me on the back after my silence. "Qian Jr., this really ain't our fault. I only heard about it afterwards, if not I would'nt've-."

"Of course," I nodded. "It's not your fault, brother." Then I left.

After reporting this to the family, my old man announced, "We are at fault for-."

But Mom interrupted before he could finish, “What’re you saying? They’re all the same—karma, I reckon! Say, you think those little punks are gonna take revenge?”



I felt kind of uneasy and had trouble sleeping for the next several days. All I could think of while tossing and turning were Shen Bin’s disgruntled, black eyes and his mom’s ancient, wrinkly face. I decided to visit their home.

The Shen household was located on the only street in town that had not been upgraded yet, and consisted of three tattered brick rooms with a roof sticking out for a kitchen.

Shen Bin’s widow mom was Ding Hongmei. She used to work at the No. 1 Cotton Spinning Factory and had been a looker once upon a time. Later on, she got involved with a sadistic brute and often got beaten blue and purple. Apparently, she was rescued once and had been naked, covered with bloody burn marks on the skin and piercings on her nose, belly, vagina...

No wonder she aged so fast.

² These two films have very, very similar titles in Chinese.

³ The borrower’s name is actually pronounced Ye (晔), not Hua (華).

⁴ A tradition left from the socialist times. A fairly old and formal way of referring to someone who is usually of working age or one’s colleague. But this word now has the meaning of homosexual, which is why Jiying is kind of repelled by it.

Chapter 02

Ding Hongmei looked afraid with her aged face scrunched up while she cowered on an ink-black bench. It seemed like she was really delighted to see me but did not know what to say.

There was a woman in the house, all right, but the place could not even compare to a pig sty. Aside from the disgusting, sour and rotten smell in the air, the table was coated with dust and on top of it was half a bowl of instant noodles from who-knows-when, manifested with a green film of mould. The original red brick floor simply could not be seen. It was plushy beneath my feet—a carpet woven from peanut shells, sunflower seed shells, cigarette butts and some unknown substance.

I kind of understood why Shen Bin had reminded me of trash. It is hard not to become trash when you live in trash.

The old woman looked shamefaced and grabbed something from the kitchen that might be called a washcloth of sorts and started wiping the table and chair.

“Comrade Qian, sit, sit! How ‘bout a glass of water?”

Comrade again, ugh. And where could I possibly sit in this tiny place?

“It’s all right. I’m just dropping by. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be out in a jiffy.”

She stopped wiping and faltered before stuttering with her grey lips, “In a jiffy? Oh, but...”

Now she looked more like how she usually does, a sorry, pathetic face. I sighed. Why had I punched him again? With a mom like this, he didn’t even need me to teach him a lesson.

“You know, Comrade Qian, our lil’ ‘un always talks about you!” Her smile was awkward: it was more like a frown. “He said you’re a good man. Lets him watch films for free. He learned a lot, I tell you, even wanted to give you something for New Year’s. I don’t know why he’d hit you though. He couldn’t have. Must’ve been sick or something. It wasn’t on purpose. Could you find it in your heart to forgive him?”

I suppose she didn’t even know that her son had assaulted another person.

The rascal said I was a good man and let him watch films for free as if it were actually the case. But it must have been a waste of my world-class films watching them in this pig sty.

I didn’t feel too comfortable and left fairly soon.

A while later, I heard the hulk that Shen Bin had beaten up died.

I really regretted it. I mean, why had I stooped to the level of a kid? My old man kept sighing, saying that we had collected bad karma. My old lady might have said one thing but she was more or less uneasy inside as well. Especially after knowing that the big fellow was a bastard who trafficked children, she became even more worried that they would take revenge. However, we didn’t hear anything from Shen Bin’s lackeys and Shen Bin’s mom never showed up again.

Some time later, it was the court hearing.

I sneaked in to listen.

When the rascal was brought out, I was astounded. He was healthy as a buck, as if nothing had happened. And there I was, prepared for the worst

case scenario—say insanity or disability, or at least depression or despair—but he looked to be in even better shape than he had before. Better looking, too. I think steam was coming out of my ears.

Afterwards I realised, no matter how bad prison food was, it was better than the pig sty trash; no matter how uncomfortable prison was, it was better than the pig sty. It was no wonder that he gained some weight and livelihood. Also, his hair was shaved short, his clothes were cleaner and sharper and he had a more proper expression, too. He actually looked like a human being for once.

Surprisingly, he became a man only after being locked up. I wondered what his ma, Ding Hongmei, had to say about that.

I spotted her sitting in the gallery with her shoulders curved inwards, sobbing, and I started feeling bad again. Yet that damn jerk did not look one bit remorseful. He totally deserves the punishment, I thought.

But I was still shocked when the judge found him guilty of manslaughter and sentenced him to ten years in prison.

Shouldn't it be justifiable homicide out of self-defense?

The big fellow was...

It should be justifiable homicide!

Ding Hongmei bawled her eyes out, crying for mercy to the judge, and lunged forth to hug her son. Then, I finally saw him do something. He tilted his head back, closed his eyes and then he was brought out by the police.

He did not look at me once from beginning to end.

As if I wasn't the one who did this to him.

The second brother actually came over afterwards to explain this to my old man. He said that the security bureau, the control yuan and the court were all managed by the Party and they were just, but the fellow had acted

up and insisted that the two of them were fighting and it had only gotten out of hand. There was no way for the judge to say it was self-defense!

My heart skipped a beat for some strange reason.

Shen Bin's lackeys came once after that. They didn't wreck my shop or steal anything and only said, "Shen Bin's the real deal. Busted Ol' Wu up with three punches. His name's big on the streets now!"

Fuck. Who did they think he was? Flowery Monk, Lu Zhishen⁵? On the streets, my ass. Obviously someone had been watching too much *Young and Dangerous*.

⁵ A character in *Outlaws of the Marshes* who killed someone with three punches. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lu_Zhishen

Chapter 03

The whole thing ended just like that and I went back to running my little rental shop.

Summer came in the blink of an eye. Students went on summer break and business was good.

The girls liked reading romance novels so I stocked up on pirated pocket books from Taiwan despite the strict watch on piracy from the ministry of commerce. I mean I could not just let money slip through my fingers. I hid the pirated books in the back room and only regular customers could go in. If people came to investigate, I would lock the back room door. I made it through quite a few surprise checks and built a good reputation. Many girls would come from the other side of town to borrow books.

Later, some of them asked me to get some manga. There actually was manga in the shop—*Slam Dunk*, *Case Closed*, *Saint Seiya*, all the ones airing on TV—but they pouted and complained. “It’s 1998 for god sakes!”

Are those out already? I wondered. To be honest, my generation grew up watching martial arts movies and movies from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the only cartoon we had were *Havoc in Heaven*, *Astro Boy*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Transformers* and the like. All I knew about these things they called manga was that they were like comic strips, thus the manga books I bought were not up to par with my videos. The girls kept nagging me about *Zetsuai 1989*, *Ranma ½*, *Rurouni Kenshin*, *RG Veda* and

other stuff I had no knowledge of, but kids were the biggest market for my business so I had to keep learning. I bought *Zetsuai 1989* and some of their so-called classics, as well as a set of Japanese romance novels they recommended countless times to me.

In the end, business was absolutely great. Wave after wave of girls lined up to rent my books.

I was utterly puzzled. We had not been this excited back then to read about Qiao Feng⁶, Chu Liuxiang⁷ or Xiao Qishui⁸! Tsk, tsk.

My little shop was small but busy and became an oven in the summer. I considered getting an air conditioner but it seemed like a waste of money too. The money I earned in a month would go entirely to pay for hydro.

That day was scorching hot and no one was coming in during the middle of the day.

I wiped myself off, stretched for the sky and turned on the TV. I could only watch TV. My second-hand Shinco VCD player had finally gone to its last resting place so I was also considering getting a DVD player.

Ah, it all cost so much money!

“Oi, Qian!” Three thugs came into my shop. I took a good look at them. They turned out to be Shen Bin’s buddies.

How long has it been now? And they’re here again?

“What, you don’t recognise us no more?” They didn’t look friendly but they didn’t sound too bad either. I let out a sigh of relief.

They were kids after all. There was nothing I could do but I could not help but think that the rascal would not have ended up behind bars if it were not for me. I mean, ten years! He was eighteen and would be twenty-eight when he came out. There was no way that prison life would be nice. All the naughty pups that went in came out as big bad wolves. I had a wild imagination and immediately thought of a lot of prison-themed novels and movies.

Sigh. I just felt like I had wronged him.

Therefore, I said in a rather kind tone, “Of course I do. You’re Shen Bin’s bros. How is he doing in there?”

Only the leader of the three was okay to the eyes; he looked like a mini-sized “Chicken” Chiu⁹. The other two had not yet even hit their growth spurt, yet they were acting all high and mighty with a half-burnt cigarette in their mouths. I wanted to laugh so badly.

“Yer not such a bad person. He’s doin’ fine!” The smallest one bragged.

“What can I do for you? You want to rent videos? I can give you a discount.”

“Fuck your movies. Only Shen Bin likes that shit!”

They shared a look with each other and then Mini-Chicken spat, “Hey, you Qians made Shen Bin go in the slammer for ten years. Shouldn’t you at least show some goodwill?”

Were they trying to wring money out of me?

I closed the shop and got dragged along by them. It was so damn hot that I was sweating too much to keep my eyes opened.

I arrived at the Shen pig sty on the old street once again.

“Stop it. I can walk myself,” I grumbled as I was pushed into the house.

Last time I had only gone into the living room. This time I was pushed into the room where you sleep (I couldn’t find it in my heart to call it a bedroom). There was a wooden bed that still had some colour on it with a black, grimy white canopy, and someone was lying on it, probably Ding Hongmei. I almost did not recognise her dishevelled hair, bloated stomach and thin, twig-like arms and thighs.

Apparently, she was about to die.

How could that be? I was dumbstruck.

This was none of my business.

But they also said she had had terminal breast cancer for a long time and did not have the money to treat it. Now the cancer had spread to the body and she was waiting to die at home.

Yeah. She got the disease herself. It had nothing to do with me.

But last time I saw her, she was only a bit old and dirty, not sick.

Maybe it had gotten worse because of the stress?

I became even more confused. Why had they made me come here when it had nothing to do with me?

The three of them were not shy about it either, shouting, “She’s gon die. Shen Bin’s in the slammer and they don’t got no family and we ain’t got no money. There should at least be a whatchamacallit—service or whatever! You or your family...shouldn’t you help out?”

Memorial service? I laughed. Who would come to commemorate a promiscuous widow like her?

It turned out they came to me to get money to cremate her and buy a container for her ashes. Mini-Chicken even became red in the eyes. I suppose they were still kids after all.

Ding Hongmei woke up. The final surge of energy kicked in and she was fairly conscious. She took a long look at me. “Comrade Qian, you came to see me. Our Lil’ Bin said you’re a good person. You have to look out for him! He’s not bad. It was my fault. I tell you, he’s not bad...”

Her claw-like hand clasped around my wrist. It was cold. I did not feel sweaty at all despite the burning temperature, and actually felt chilly.

I arranged her undertaking behind my mom’s back.

I stuck to the simplest options but even so I spent over one hundred bucks. It was enough for me to buy half an air conditioner, or over two hundred disks, or hundreds of books...

That widow actually had not saved a single penny! Even their house was state-owned. The department that the abuser worked for had not given

them the boot out of pity. Now that no one was living here, they were going to take it back. I went through it again but there really wasn't much except for garbage. It made me very curious as to how she had the money to get the fruits for me.

Wait a second. I felt something was off.

I searched through the dump again and finally found a flat cardboard box inside a beaten wood box underneath Shen Bin's metal cot. Inside was some plastic wrap and inside that, was a half-new BBK VCD player. It was not dirty or dusty at all.

Shen Bin's buddies started buzzing, "Oh man! How could we've forgotten about this? It could probably sell for some dough!"

"You wish. Shen-ge¹⁰ treasures this shit. No way he'd let you sell it!"

"But it's to bury his ma. Gotta sell it no matter what."

"But what could we get for this antique?"

"Oh yeah. Qian-ge, how much could we get?"

They really were kids. They had started calling me 'Qian-ge' since I helped with the funeral.

I brought that player to my shop since I needed one. Now I did not have to buy a new one.

Huh! This junk's pretty darn good. Can read all sorts of formats too!

⁶ One of the three main characters of *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils* by Jin Yong.

⁷ Protagonist of *Chu Liuxiang Series* by Gu Long.

⁸ Protagonist of *Heroes of Shenzhou* by Woon Swee Oan.

⁹ Character from the *Young and Dangerous* series.

¹⁰ 哥(ge1), is the suffix added behind the name of men who are higher in status and/or age than the speaker, or when the speaker wants to sound respectful but also show familiarity at the same time.

Chapter 04

The ordeal should have ended after that, but for some reason I felt... I did not even know what I felt.

Anyhow, the days went by just the same: lots of dates set up by the parents. And wouldn't you know, I got lots of yes's. If I had a dollar for every time I rejected someone, I would have been rich. Gradually, the word got around that the Qians' kid had high expectations and the recommendations decreased too. Of course, that was the better way to put it. Maybe in a few more years, they would say I have some weird illness—the kind you can't show anyone.

I thought I would just see where it goes. My parents were crazy for a grandkid. Maybe I should just get married. But I couldn't just cheat the girl. Maybe I should just ditch this place and go find some man. But I just got my business running (Who was I kidding here. But really, I wanted to start my own chain of record stores called 'Qian Jr.'s Records.'). Ugh, I guess I should just go become a monk!

There was no point for me to waste more effort thinking about it. I'll just figure something out when the time comes, I thought.

Near the end of '98, I hired a young lady who was kind of related to me to look after the shop because I was preparing to open a second shop in the developing east side of the town. It got really busy and I had to buy more stuff to stock the new shop with.

There were only two places to do so at that time. You either went down south to Guangzhou or east to Shanghai.

I ended up going to neither this time, mainly because I was not too familiar with those places. There was more variety but I would not have gotten any good deals. At any rate, the most important for a new shop was Mainland stuff and they had that anywhere. So I ended up going to City N nearby.

To come back on the same day, I had to leave at four-thirty in the morning. After eating breakfast in City N when the sky was barely light, I had to rush to grab the disks and books and eat some quick lunch before rushing back in the afternoon.

That day turned out really well. I ran into someone I knew and got everything done in a jiffy. He even dropped me off at the bus station, no extra charge.

Seeing that I still had plenty of time, I wandered around with no particular aim. The wholesale markets were close to the outskirts so there was not much going on. I was just wondering if I should head into the city centre and—

Oh hey!

It was not my first time stocking up in City N but I noticed for the first time that the city prison was near the book markets.

Wasn't the punk, Shen Bin, locked up there?

I had nothing on my hands so I went to visit him for some goddamn reason.

The correctional officers were pretty mild and down-to-earth, not how I had pictured them in my mind. I had thought that all the prison guards would look like those rapists in *Sleepers*, or that evil warden in *The Shawshank Redemption*. I admit I was fairly immature and had a wild imagination.

The officer said he thought Shen Bin didn't have any relatives since the only ones to have visited were his delinquent buddies from before. He probably thought I was the only decent-looking person to visit Shen Bin.

He also said that Shen Bin was too young, that if he had been born a few months later, he would be considered a minor and would not even be locked up there. The prison was a complicated place and he told me to be watch out for him and guide him back to the right path.

I agreed profusely.

Turns out there were still nice people in this world.

But on what basis could I watch out for him? If it hadn't been for my punch... I tasted a bitter tang in my mouth. Yeah, the kid was only eighteen.

The prison in City N was not as advanced as it is now. There were not a glass and a phone but instead a big room and a long row of tables. The prisoners sat on the south end and the visitors on the north end.

As I watched him come in, I had no idea what to say. Why did I even go in the first place?

It was actually the first time I had a good look at him.

He was a bit fatter than before and not as snazzy. He even grew.

Actually, his eyes and brows did look like Ding Hongmei's, very clean. His eyes were less disgruntled but still impenetrably black.

He did not say anything. No expression, either. He just pursed his lips. I couldn't just sit there and not say anything.

"I, um, I didn't bring anything. I would've if I knew..."

That was the first thing I said to him which he still laughs about after a long, long time. But it *was* pretty stupid.

He still didn't make a sound.

I thought to myself, I don't owe him anything and I even took care of his old lady's funeral and...

“How’s everything? Did you get bullied?”

No reply.

“Study hard.” I remembered he was a hillbilly.

Still no reply.

I began to regret it. I must have been crazy to go there in the first place.

“Okay, I’m gonna go then!” Then I got up from my seat.

“Yo, I’m doin’ fine. What I got locked up for is this inside.”

Seeing the kiddo across from me stick his thumb up and smirk arrogantly, I felt kind of warm inside.

I nod. “That’s great. You study hard though. Your mom said you’re a good kid.”

His face darkened.

Did I say something? I thought Ding Hongmei loved this son of hers.

He stood up too and pointed his chin towards me. “Your videos ain’t half bad, bro. Can’t get them in the slammer though,” he said before leaving.

After coming out from the prison, I began to feel antsy.

He’s doing okay in there. Better than before.

I’m going to be thirty-something by the time he gets out. A poor, old man, hah.

Chapter 05

*A*s a matter of fact, he was lying in my third shop right now.

But it was now the third night of the first lunar month¹¹, 2001.

Sigh.

All bloody, too.

Why did I have to end up with this devil?

He had only been locked up for two years and two months when he was released a bit more than half a year ago.

They said there was a fire in the prison and not only did he rescue the government property, he also saved all the correctional officers and even a higher-up sent to survey City N. He was behaving well to begin with and completed a computer diploma in two years, not to mention he was young and had a pitiful background.

Thus, he was released early.

See what kind of luck this bastard had?

That day, he came into my third shop that had recently opened and gave me a scare.

The fellow had a nearly clean, shaved head and was wearing a loose, white tank top and Hawaiian shorts, looking quite sharp. However, he still had an earring, more specifically a stud, the kind that you would not notice unless you looked closely.

Ah¹²-Fen, the young lady who was kind of related and helped me at the shop, had her eyes wide open. Why, was he hot or something?

Thinking back to how disgusting he used to be, I shook my head in disappointment. This was the same girl who made a move on me, heading over to my house every now and then to help with the housework. My mom was beyond delighted and practically thought of this girl as the mother of my unborn babies.

Shen Bin asked me out to dinner to thank me for helping with his mom's funeral.

"Gimme a chance. C'mon!" He didn't even call me 'ge'. I would have you know that those buddies of his had been very passionate about calling me 'Qian-ge' whenever they came to hang out at my two shops.

Yet, there he was, all disrespectful—

"Hey, keep your hands to yourself!" I flicked his meathook off of my shoulder and did not sense there being anything wrong with what he said.

He paid no heed and reached around my shoulders with an arm, successfully dragging me out the door.

"You're still so awkward!" He was mumbling.

I hated him with all my guts. How could he be so much taller than me? I would not be able to lay a finger on him in a few years. Also, awkward? How was I awkward? Fucking bullshit.

I thought I was supposed to be his enemy and even if there were no hard feelings, it was all over—O-V-E-R—over. I just did not want to get involved with someone like him.

Ahh, Ms. Ah-Fen was definitely going to tattle to my old lady. It was going to be a handful again.

Maybe I felt that I owed him or maybe I did not find him so disgusting anymore, I ended up going out to dinner with him. I even fought for the bill afterwards. He did not look too happy about it.

Tsk, what's there to be unhappy about? You don't have the money to pay for me when you just got out of prison.

I might be skinny but I have got a big appetite. I made it my goal to eat my fair share since I was paying anyways. Therefore, I did not bother to talk to him and dug in.

“Yo, I’m the one fresh outta the slammer! Why you the one stuffin’ yourself?”

I looked up at him with a mouthful of *cha siu*. He was sitting there looking all angry with puffed-up cheeks.

I think that was the moment when everything started to change.

I don’t know why but I had never liked anyone in all those years. Even though I liked men, I had never taken a liking to any.

I thought it was out of sympathy and pity at that time.

But someone once said that love stemming from sympathy and pity is actually more down-to-earth. I think it was Zheng Zhihua talking about his wife.

Seeing his fuming face, I quickly gulped down the meat and asked, “Any plans for the future?”

“Me? How ‘bout watching the shop for you?”

“Huh?” My old lady would freak the shit out. Although we knew what had really happened, everyone else around here knew him as a killer. No one would borrow stuff from my shop anymore. I mean, even as I was eating with him, we were getting attention from several pairs of eyes.

“What? Afraid I’d tear your lil’ shop down?” He turned away.

Did I hurt his ego?

“Well, no, see, the pay is kind of, you know, low.” I was treading carefully.

“Hah! You really thought I would wanna work in that shithole of yours? As if!” He was snickering when he turned back around—not unhappy at

all. “I got a place to go. Don’t gotta worry ‘bout me!” Then he reached over, his hand pausing for a second in midair before landing on my shoulder. I was about to scold him again when he retracted it. “Heh, I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

I wondered where he originally wanted to put his hand.

I finally replied after a while, “I wasn’t worried.”

He dropped his head and then raised it again. “Thank you, *ge*.”

He sounded very serious.

Actually, I doubt I had ever told him that it wasn’t my idea to put him in the same room with that scumbag. It was not my idea, but it still had something to do with me.

I wondered why he never seemed to hate me, to take revenge on me or on the Qians.

I never did him much kindness either.

He would still be munching on prison food if he had not put out the fire and rescued a bunch of people.

“Wh-what are you thanking me for?” I bit my lips.

My old lady says I only bite my lips when I am sad.

¹¹ January 26, 2001.

¹² A prefix to single-syllable names to convey the familiarity and an equal or superior status of the speaker. Single-syllable names are problematic to use because of the amount of homonyms in Chinese.

Chapter 06

*M*y mind was wandering all over the place so when I got home that night, I did not even hear my old lady calling me. Of course, more trouble ensued.

“Son, why do you always forget things? You’re just like your old man—a woman inside a man’s body. Ah-Fen told me everything: the murderer came to your shop today. He’s up to no good, I tell you. You gotta draw the line with him, okay? And if he comes again, ignore him. Don’t feel like you owe him anything. You and your dad are like, uh, whatshisname, the one who saved the wolf and almost fed himself to it?”

I filled in the blank for her—Master Dongguo.

“Right, Master Dongguo. Now where was I? Oh yeah. He wouldn’t dare cause any trouble when we got people in the police station. You should’ve just given him some money, not eat dinner together.” She heaved a sigh. “You’re a grown man already so stop making us old bags of bones worry for you. Didn’t you say Ah-Fen’s nice? She cares about you a lot too. She’s a sweet, little thing. You should consider...”

My mom was a nagging harpy.

“You done, woman? Your son needs to sleep!” My dad yelled down from upstairs.

I yawned and started climbing up.

After two steps, I turned back around and said to my mom, “No wonder you like Ah-Fen. You’re just as naggy as her.”

“Hey! You hold it right there! What did you say to me?”

I giggled the entire time as I went upstairs. There was no point in arguing about a lot of things with older people. They had an impermeable mindset about certain issues. At any rate, they were the parents who had raised me, my closest two people in the world. I learned after all my years struggling in society to not get in a conflict with your parents or anyone for that matter. Just do what you should do. Fighting won’t make you right.

I really did not want them to worry about me.

However, this time, I was not so certain.

Dad came in right after I lied down on the bed. My old man and I had not had a heart-to-heart for ages, the last time being university applications in senior year. He had not let me apply to faraway but easier schools and instead made me apply to schools along the Shanghai-Nanjing railway. In the end, I did not make it into the school of medicine of City N and did agricultural parasites instead.

My old man sat tall and proper while saying some important stuff.

“They say honour is the first and foremost when navigating the *jianghu*. We must not go against our morals. That fellow was released for doing good which means he is inherently a good person. We were at fault to start with so we must help out if he is in trouble.”

See, my old man worked in a museum for his whole life. *Jianghu*, I chortled in my mind.

“Your ma is just being a typical woman but she’s right about one thing. You should settle down soon. The Qian family only has you as the only male heir so you have to leave our name behind!”

Sigh. Marriage. Heirs.

Sigh. I don’t like women. No, I do not.

I'll just tell them straight to the face tomorrow morning, that I'm impotent. No, they'll just bury me in medicine. Ahhhhhhhh, enough! Sleep now, think later!

I thought I saw Shen Bin's eyes with my head under the sheets.
Those black, impenetrable eyes.

Compared with him, I was much better off. At least I had a big family and my parents were still alive and in good health. I was the only son and everyone adored me.

And what about him?

Honestly, I did not have much of a relationship with him. Before the incident, he only came to my shop to get disks and after it, I only saw him three times. Why was I constantly thinking about him then?

He said he has a place to go but he doesn't even have a place to stay in. Where could he possibly go?

He better not go down the wrong path!

Startled, I sat up and my back was wet with cold sweat.



I had not liked anyone aside from my parents and relatives. I did not even have any close friends. My world was made up of movies plus novels, entirely fictional.

I really didn't know how to take care of another person.

Seeing Shen Bin lying on the cot in high fever, I had no idea what to do.

I could not go to the hospital. There weren't any drugs in the shop and the drugstores were all closed by now because it was the holiday season. Going back home would raise suspicion.

I thought silently to myself. *Hmm, serves you right. Told you to behave. Serves you right to get hurt. You're far from dead anyways.*

He was so tall that he could not even lie flat on the cot. He kept groaning under his breath and frowning. I could not tell if it was a knife or gunshot wound.

This guy would always come running to me when he got into trouble.

This guy, he had gone down the wrong path.

And there was no turning back for him.

I had separated my fictional and real world very well.

I had only wanted to run a rental shop, watch my movies and live a simple life.

He would change my life.

And I couldn't let anyone do that.

The following night after the dinner, I went over to the house of his buddy, Mini-Chicken—Lin Dongfu (and I had thought it was the actor, Lin Dongfu¹³)—and told my family I was going to sleep in the shop.

There was only the two of us and he could not withstand my interrogation so he spilled.

He told me he met a boss in jail who took good care of him. Now this boss person had been released, too, and started a security company in Shanghai. He asked Shen Bin to work for him.

Security company? Bodyguards? Why did it sound like something from a movie?

Security service was a borderline legal career to begin with and the company was run by ex-convicts...

But it was none of my business.

Really, he should just come and work in my shop. Things might have been a bit hard at first but at least it was a proper job.

I did not say anything.

“You not happy?” He blinked at me.

His eyes were really pretty.

My face was a bit warm. “Who? Me? It’s nothing to do with me!”

“Why’s your face red?”

“What?” I lied saying it was hot and got up to leave.

“Kay, I’ll go with you. Let’s go watch some stuff at your shop. I really like *Happy Together*,” he said as he got up too.

“That’s a ‘fag film.’ Why do you like watching them so much?” The rascal had some taste after all.

“I can like them too.” He didn’t look at me but stared at the ground and crushed a beetle crawling on Lin Dongfu’s floor. He spoke very softly. But I was entranced by it.

“I run a rental shop. It’s a job requirement for me, not a matter of preference.”

“Job requirement, huh?” He was still very quiet. He stopped and swung an arm over.

“What are you doing?” He rested his arm on my shoulder. He would always do this just because he had the height advantage.

“Let’s go already. Lin Dongfu’s rents gonna be back soon from mah-jong.”

See, this guy kicked Mini-Chicken out of his own house. I felt kind of bad for the little guy.

We headed for my shop.

No conversation the whole way.

He just kept trailing behind me. I did not want him to have his arm around me but I never said he couldn’t walk beside me.

“Hey!” I stopped. Having someone dogging you at night time felt really weird. “Get up here.”

“No.”

“Hey!”

“I said no!”

“Screw you!”

He just stood there without retorting.

Was he mad?

I sometimes wondered whether he saw me as his mom or older brother.

He was only twenty years old.

And orphaned.

Anyhow, it felt quite nice having someone who needed my comforting and reassurance.

¹³ Mini-Chicken's name is 林棟複 and the actor's name is 林棟甫.

Chapter 07

I really like *Happy Together*, especially the small things.

“I feel horrible.”

Tony Leung was sick in bed with a fever from going on a morning jog with the self-willed Leslie Cheung, but the culprit in question begged and pleaded, forcing the sick man to cook for him.

“I’m starving though!”

“What’s wrong with you? How could you make a sick person cook for you?!”

Yet, despite the chef’s complaining, he still added an egg in after a few second’s hesitation.

It’s because of these little things.

It was really late when we finished watching the film. He did a stretch as if he was in his own home.

“Know what I like about this movie?”

I looked at him.

“Lai Yiu-fai is so fortunate to be able to write to his dad and even have the chance to ask for forgiveness and start again,” he said this with a squinty smile.

You don’t have family, so you can’t start again—is that it?

I could not help but feel bad.

“Tsk. Look at your frown. Did you believe me? It was a lie, you dummy. I ain’t got no dad or mom.” He was giggling, looking all delighted.

Then he pursed his lips and continued seriously, “I just like Tony Leung. He’s such a caring person. If I were Ho Po-wing, I’d follow him ‘til the end of the world.”

If you were Ho Po-wing?

You—

“Ge, I like men,” he said under his breath.

I looked at him while he looked at the floor. He had really long lashes. My mouth was dry.

Really? Me, too.

“Ge, I like you.” He looked up and gazed at me. His words were still very faint but each syllable knocked into my heart.

My face was burning and I cast my eyes elsewhere to evade those pretty, opaque, black eyes of his.

I gulped nervously.

Me... Me, too.

He reached over and latched onto my collar.

“What about you?”

I didn’t reply to him.

“I thought you were a good person. And I was right.”

Still no reply.

“Come spoil me with your love, won’t you?”

I was still silent.

I wanted to cry. I really wanted to cry.

He started wiping at the tears that had already rolled down my face and was a bit caught off guard.

“I—. Hey, don’t cry! I...”

I held him tight, a child who was younger but stronger than me. His shoulders were even wider than mine.

He was shaking all over as he held me back even tighter. We parted only when I could not breathe properly.

We looked into each other's eyes, two black and the other two pink from crying, and I felt a little awkward.

"You have bunny eyes." It sounded like he was teasing me.

I bit my lips, not because I was sad this time but because I was angry. I hadn't cried for, what, twenty years?

We were fighting in this room just before. He used to be... Who would have known this day would come?

He stared at me like a vulture staring at a dead body.

I got even angrier. I was older than him, all right?

He lunged towards me and hugged me again.

I really had zero experience. Experience with intimacy, I mean. But I found out then that it was very cozy.

His scent was one of a boy's, the scent of youth.

With his head on my shoulder, he murmured, "I really like you. I have for a long time."

"Mhm."

"You knew?" He pushed us apart and pouted.

"Huh?" I didn't. I had no idea how things came to be the way they were. Had he liked me before? That little thug with the sticky, yellow hair who caused a ruckus in my shop every other day or so? Somehow I was not too surprised.

Without much thought, I patted his head. It was just a head of short, fuzzy hair but it looked cleaner this way.

He blushed a little and hid back into my arms.

“I just knew you were the same as me. But I wouldn’t have had to go through all that if only I knew you’d be this easy. I should’ve just went for it back then.”

Went for it? Back then? Hah, I’d like to see you try to go for it when I karate chop you to death.

“Yo, I know even if you don’t say it. You looked down on me back then. Would act like you saw a ghost or somethin’.”

He tightened his grip and my waist started hurting from his constraint. I wiggled around but he wouldn’t let go.

“Ouch!” I felt a sharp pain on my shoulder: the bastard bit me. “Are you a dog or something?!”

“Oh, now you talk?”

His scorching gaze, his black eyes seemed to glow faintly but I could not see the bottom of them.

“Qian Jiying, let’s do it.”

Chapter 08

“Call me ‘ge’.” I liked it when he called me ‘ge’. It felt nice.

My name was just too outdated.

“Ge.” He flashed a meaningful smile. “Yes or no?”

I wanted to try it. Although I had considered becoming a monk many times, being a virgin boy was nothing to be proud of.

I was very nervous but I did not want him to know. I was the ‘ge’ for goodness’ sake.

Thank goodness I sometimes stayed over at the shop so I had some towels and soap and stuff. I pushed him into the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash up—face, feet, butt, everything—while I made the bed.

“OCD!”

“Who’re you to say that?” I retorted. I had not forgotten about that pig sty.

The little punk went in to wash up unwillingly.

I suddenly had a thought. I wondered if it was his first time. Meanwhile, I started peeking.

“Ahh! You creep! Pervert!” I felt utterly embarrassed being called out by him.

“What’re you screaming about? You’re going to alarm the neighbourhood watch!” I then added after a short pause, “And so what if I look?”

His butt was really pale.

He insisted on turning off the lights and I was too shy so I did.

The metal cot was very narrow so the two of us could only huddle close together under one blanket.

I thought about this too many times to count. I caressed everything from each rib bone along his torso, the two small, hard nipples and his waist and back to his firm butt and member.

“We got all night,” he panted roughly. “There’s no rush.”

I *was* in a rush. I sealed his lips with mine; it tasted like Colgate. He had thirty-two teeth. Damn, I only had twenty-eight.

I was already hard. I knew what to do but I had never done it before.

Unexpectedly, he chortled and then grabbed it with his cool hands and stroked it.

Ahhh!

I bit hard on my bottom lip.

Damn that feels good.

A hundred times better than my own hand. His hand—oh my god!

It’s his mouth. I’m in his mouth. Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

I was up in cloud nine, literally.

By the time I landed on solid earth again, we were both sticky with sweat. His member was poking my thigh. I reached out and grabbed it.

Oh shit, I’m sorry.

I used a bit too much force as it was my first time. He hissed out in pain and I freaked out, but he only chuckled. He put a hand over mine and started moving slowly.

The result of our two hands stroking his member was that I got hard again.

“Pretty enthusiastic, aren’t we?” He breathed in my ear after coming once.

I was in a rush so I rubbed myself against his thigh. I had thought I would have a monk's life: I did not even have any desires of this kind when I was twenty. I suppose I just never met the right person.

He started joking with me, reaching behind and pressing on my backdoor. It gave me a fright.

Not this. Not this, right?

"Pffft! Look at you, all scared." He took his hand back but that made me feel bad. "Do me, 'kay?"

Huh?

He turned around, spat into his hand and reached for his own behind. He only smeared it a couple of times before trying to stick my thing in.

Anyone with the tiniest amount of common sense would know that place was not made as an entrance. It was not going to be easy.

"Ju-just use your hand."

"Shut up!" I could feel the daggers flying at me even with the lights off. He really wanted me to fuck him, huh?

The arrow was nocked and ready to go so I couldn't stop myself. With his hand's guidance, I steadied his waist and went for it. I had prepared for failure and even was considering with the remaining brain cells the possibility of using vanishing cream as lubricant when I went all the way in.

He was tight but it was definitely not his first time, nor his second or third time, but his nth time. But I couldn't care less. It felt so damn good. I just kept going and going and going. Only when I was done feeling good did I notice he was quivering a little. Okay, not just a little. He was practically shaking like a leaf and his back was covered with sweat.

"Does it hurt. I'm—"

He didn't make a sound but I spotted his hands clinging tightly onto the bar on the side of the cot.

How could I be so stupid? I quickly reached down to his butt. It wasn't bleeding. I knew it wasn't bleeding but his little guy was all shrunken up.

"Binbin¹⁴, does it hurt? I'm so sorry. Say something, won't you?"

"I'm. Okay." It sounded like he was speaking through clenched teeth.

"I'll. Letchu. Off this time. Just you. Wait 'til my turn."

It made me feel even worse seeing him taunting me and trying to make me feel better while suffering so much pain.

Really, this guy.

I held him and let him lie on top of me with his chin on my shoulder. He liked this position.

I swept my hand back and forth on his back. It was not as smooth as his thighs. I guessed there were some scars.

After some deliberation, I still asked, "Did that Wu guy do anything to you when you were in the detention centre?"

I felt him stiffen. He did not reply.

I felt so guilty.

It was completely understandable for him to not have pleaded for homicide out of self-defense. I mean, who would want other people to know about those things? Yet, what I had just done...

The next thing I knew, he was kissing me.

"It wasn't self-defense. I started beating the crap outta him before he could do anything."

I didn't believe him.

"Believe it or not."

"But Binbin—"

"I just hate people like him." I could hear the chilling, murderous intent in his voice. I believed him.

Is that so? But then why?

I really wanted to ask: Before me, who else did you...

But he was so tired, I couldn't possibly ask that.

Let the past be the past. I just wanted to be with him.

When I woke up in the morning, he was already getting dressed.

There were many pale, white scars on his back, only a bit lighter than his skin colour—probably old wounds. There was also a brown, fist-sized scar near his waist of unknown origin.

Ding Hongmei's lover was a sadistic brute.

He noticed that I had woken up so he whisked around. “You’re peeking again!”

I stuck my arms out. “Come snuggle, Binbin.”

“Cheesy.” He dived on top of me. Thank god the cot was sturdy.

I hugged him tight, really, really tight. “You fuck me next time.”

“Don’t need to say that twice. I’m a pro.”



He went to Shanghai the next day.

I wanted to ask him to stay. But I was a bit too shy.

He laughed at me.

And promised to study hard and not go down the wrong path.

But he broke that promise.

¹⁴ Repeating the same syllable makes the name and the speaker sound cute/immature. For example, saying 媽媽 (ma ma) instead of 媽 (ma) sounds cuter and is more often used by young children. In this case, Jiying sounds very affectionate, like he’s talking to a baby. Side note: I stopped calling my mom 媽媽 when I reached high school. I now call her 媽 (ma) or 老媽 (lao ma).

Chapter 09

A few days after he left, I had to go to Shanghai to stock up on some merchandise so I was planning to come back with him. His old lady, Ding Hongmei's second death anniversary was coming up.

It kind of blew my mind when I thought about it.

I got on the eastbound train. For some damn reason, there was a ton of people going to Shanghai even on a Sunday and the train was packed. I had only bought the regular ticket so I only got a seat after some people got off at Suzhou.

I had not gone to Shanghai for stocking purposes and I was most likely going this time because he was there.

He went to Shanghai and I really missed him.

I really had done it with him.

Every time I thought about this, I gulped nervously, which I still did even after a long, long time.

An earthquake was about to upset my little world.

I was a bit scared, well, not exactly scared but nervous, excited and wary. I would think about it and my hands would get so sweaty. Things went way out of hand and I had allowed it to for some reason. It was just that I couldn't care less. When he looked down and looked back up again, and he said he liked me, just for that moment, I couldn't care less.

I doubt I was as calm as I thought I was.

I wanted to smoke.

I couldn't help but think about the future.

I couldn't and didn't want him to leave my life. But...

Then again, I was kind of confused. I wasn't as determined as him. I wondered how he could be so certain. What if I had rejected him? What if I didn't like him? What if I said bye-bye after fucking him?

He was younger so he was braver, or maybe he was just braver than me.

Recalling his quivering spine as he took me, I clenched my teeth.

I was his 'ge' after all; I could not be worse than him.

Wen Miao¹⁵ was swarming with people. Luckily, I managed to get some cartoons from a small vendor on the outskirts. Cartoon was starting to get popular at that time, the kind you played on the computer. The quality was bad. You could only sell it and not rent it because it would go bad after being watched a couple of times. However, there were lots of good stuff.

We'd better take the coach back. The train station's security is pretty tight.

By then, I had found out why those girls were climbing over each other to borrow my books. Most of them came for this thing called BL—boy's love. Why would girls want to read these strange, new things? I actually tried asking Ah-Fen. From what she told me, she would not even be here working for me if she made the same efforts on her university entrance exam as she did reading BL. I didn't know what to say to that. She also said something like, 'it's real love, you won't get it.'

Tsk, tsk. Yeah, yeah, I don't get it.

At first, it was only made by those Japanese people. By then, there were some coming out from Taiwan, too, but the quality was quite different.

I felt kind of guilty for renting these out to young girls. They were a bit too young. But how could I let business slip away? Then the thought occurred to me that those Japanese were still pretty fucked up after

reading BL for so many years. Maybe if you gave your children a fucked up education, your children would not get fucked up by other people.

I left Wen Miao and started asking around for directions with his security service company's address. No one knew the directions and when I got to a policeman, he said, "First take the ×× bus then the ×× bus then the ×× bus, and then walk for one stop." But his colleague disagreed, saying it was better to "take the taxi to People's Square and take the subway to ×× Station and then take the ××× bus," because even though it would cost an extra buck or so, I wouldn't have to walk.

I did not know who to listen to. Shanghai was just too damn big.

I managed to find the place. It was a high-rise building. The good news was that I dressed decently so the guard out front did not give me a hard time. I found "VM Security" on the twenty-fifth floor. The company was in a three-bedroom, two-living suite. There was only a young kid, younger than Shen Bin, probably because it was the weekend.

"Oh, you're looking for Bin-ge. He'll be back really soon." He was a warm kid, poured some water for me and showed me to a seat.

Soon after, he came back with five or six muscles behind him. His cheeks actually flushed red out of shyness when he saw me after coming in. It was only for a second or two but flowers were practically blooming in my little, beating heart.

He was dressed decently, too. T-shirt and jeans. His hair had gotten a bit longer.

"This is my cousin," I heard him telling the men behind him. Those big guys all nodded to me respectfully—so I guessed that he was their boss. It felt sort of off, though, and I couldn't pinpoint what exactly.

Afterwards, we went to a small shop and ordered a few dishes and two cans of beer. He did not sit across the table from me but right next to me.

He seemed to be doing well in VM (violent men?) Security so I did not want to ask him to help me back home.

He drank some beer and glanced at me without saying anything. I kicked him under the table. Why, was he being shy?

“I thought you were mad.”

Huh? I looked at him.

“Kay, good that you’re not. Um. So what did you think about the company?” He dug into the food without looking at me.

“It’s good as long as it’s nothing crooked.”

He suddenly thought of something and fished it out. “The company bought these for us. Nice, eh? Samsung’s newest model, N188. It’ll be easier staying in contact with this. You can call me. If you called me today, I would’ve gone to pick you up in an instant.” He was still young and couldn’t help but get excited with new things. “I’ll get you one too when I get my paycheque in a bit. Yeah?”

Cell phones were quite rare at that time. Not like now, even people living in the dumpsters have one. The one his company bought was imported too—it had to be almost four hundred bucks. I actually did want to buy one but I thought there was not much of a need.

He puckered his lips after not seeing any reaction from me and stuffed the phone back into his pocket, looking embarrassed. He looked cautious like he didn’t want to anger me and I felt really bad. Why was I such a jerk?

Putting down my chopsticks, I stuck my hand into his pocket. “Huh, were you afraid I was going to steal it? I tell you, from now on, I’m going to call you every single day and you’re going to pay for the minutes. I was just a bit worried that your paycheque won’t be able to handle it.”

“I’m taking your word for it. No take-backs!” He burst out laughing right away. “If my paycheque’s not enough, we can always use yours. I mean you’re a business owner.”

He changed so much. Before, he used to be snobby and disgruntled. What had made him change? Growing up, life in prison, his mother’s death—or me?

You’re thinking too highly of yourself there, I laughed at myself in my head.

“Hey, what’re you laughin’ at? C’mon, let’s see you laugh now. C’mon...” He pinched my waist. I was extremely ticklish and almost spewed out all the food in my mouth. He kept laughing amusingly while patting my back.

I was really happy to see him laughing without a care like other guys his age.

I hoped he would from now on, too.

¹⁵ An area around a Confucian temple in Shanghai. The older book markets are located here.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wen_Miao,_Shanghai

Chapter 10

When Shen Bin was still locked up, his buddies and I went to visit his mother on her death anniversary. After all, she had led a sad, pitiful life. Or maybe, there had already been something special about her to me—she was Shen Bin's mom after all.

This time her son was here too. It was probably his first time visiting his old lady's grave.

I say grave but there was no mound of dirt or headstone. It was just one of the most basic marble urns that took up the cheapest spot in the columbarium wall that cost forty bucks a year. It wasn't easy finding it out of nearly a thousand other urns.

No. 779 Ding Hongmei.

The picture in front of the urn was a picture of Ding Hongmei in her earlier days when she worked for the cotton factory. She was wearing a blue sweater and had her hair tied into two pigtails. The dimple on her right cheek made her look sweet and innocent. Seeing this picture reminded me of the old woman clutching my wrist before dying. This was a cruel world.

We tidied up a bit, wiping the dust off the cubicle and replacing the red cloth on the urn with a new one. Then, we placed the fruits, pastries and flowers down.

Then her son performed the bow first.

Lin Dongfu and the rest were well-behaved and did not make a peep. I watched from the side as he bowed three times and took out a small, pretty bottle from his jacket. It was perfume. He placed it by the urn and brushed the one-by-one photo on it with his finger. It was the photo from her identity card in which her age was already evident.

I'd rather he cried. She gave birth to him and raised him after all. She might have lost all her reputation and lived miserably but she still loved her son. Ding Hongmei's illness acted up after he got locked up so that day at the hearing was probably their last time seeing each other.

He bowed three more times before calling me over.

I heard him whisper, "This is Qian-ge. He's really good to me."

I tucked my head down and couldn't lift it up again—I was crying.

The youngsters were really considerate and prepared the joss paper to burn in the allotted place given by the cemetery.

"Why're you crying when I'm not even crying? You're such a softie," he mumbled beside me before coughing a few times. Burning paper money created lots of smoke. "Well, she had it good at one point but she got her shit completely messed up."

He attempted to smile more naturally but his eyes got red. Quickly, he tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

He had done the same thing when he was brought out of the court hearing.

Oh you, silly boy, acting all tough like that.

I really wanted to squeeze him tight in my arms but all I could do was pat his shoulder and massage his nape with my thumb. Thank goodness he was not too much taller than me or else that action would have been fairly difficult.

"Just let it out, Shen-ge. You'll feel better." His loyal brothers were rubbing at their eyes, too. Lin Dongfu stuttered in between his sobs,

“Aunty¹⁶ was...actually really nice. It was just bad luck...meeting that fucking bastard...”

“I’m the one with the dead mom and I’m fine. What’s the fucking deal with you guys actin’ more miserable than I am?” His voice was a bit hoarse but he looked fine when he opened his eyes.

I did not know how to console him because lots of things do not mean much even when uttered.

I had a typical bossy dad and affectionate mom and our family was harmonious. I couldn’t understand the pains he felt.

All I could do was continue to rub his back.

He reached back and grabbed my hand. “Thank you, *ge*.”

You don’t need those formalities with me, silly.



We went for a walk after the visit.

He said there wasn’t much work recently so he could stay for a few days.

Lin Dongfu and the guys left first. Those little punks were more grown up and started to do proper things. One was doing an apprenticeship at a poultry shop. He said that all he did other than chop white cut chicken¹⁷ was chop more white cut chicken, and that he wanted to puke whenever he saw a chicken. Another one was waiting at a hotel and learning to make Western pastries so as to have a skill. Lin Dongfu’s family was pretty well-off owning a motorbike shop—the brand sponsored by Gong Li. He had been helping with the shop keeping.

What would Shen Bin be doing if he hadn’t gone in? He might just have gotten into university. I mean, he got a diploma in the slammer, right?

And even if he hadn't gotten into university, he could have learned hairdressing or cooking or chauffeuring...

"Whatcha thinking 'bout?" He kicked me.

We had already walked quite a distance, almost to my old school. It was a well-known, key high school of our province and had several famous alumni, including the former minister of foreign affairs, Shen ×¹⁸. My dad was so happy when I got in that he got stinking drunk.

"Hey, I'm talking to ya." Then he saw the school's gates. "Ohhh! You graduated from this place, right?"

He puckered his lips, his face screaming 'so what's the big dealio?'

"Yeah, so?" I wanted to laugh so hard seeing that face of his. "Look at where I am now, just running a tiny shop back home." I was probably the one doing the worst in my graduating year.

"It's good enough. You're your own boss and you like what you do. Those people working in those companies may look nice and fancy but at the end of the day, they're still workin' for someone else and they could get fired whenever. I don't see the big deal in that. Plus they don't make that much either..."

Huh, this guy had only gone for a few days but sure sounded like a smartass now.

"So why are you working there?"

"I got no other choice!" He glared menacingly at me and beat me on the chest with his fist. "All you do is judge me. I'm lucky 'nough to have a place to go to. I can't be picky."

"You're good enough." *You really are.*

He looked at me before lowering his head, his neck a bit red. "Only you'd say that," he breathed.

Really? I hooked my arm over his shoulder and planted a kiss on his neck when I saw no one was around.

His hand, one more youthful than mine, grabbed mine. “Don’t tease me ‘cause it’s your turn next!”

Sure. I shrugged. Come and get it.

That got him happier than a kid on Christmas.

We took a turn into the school. The students were on holiday and there were only a few old grandpas and grannies exercising on the field.

The school had built an all-new, modern dormitory but it had no personality at all. None of us old graduates liked it.

The brat was in a better mood and was looking around the school. “Damn, this school’s really somethin’. The tech school I was at before was so shitty. They were all a bunch of hooligans and I was their boss. You know, I actually came once to settle the score with a fucker. He stole Lin Dongfu’s cousin’s gal. The dweeb fucking peed his pants before I even lifted a finger.”

I was witness to his prowess so it was easy to picture the confident and violent him.

Had he changed now? Watching him brag about his old adventures like a kid with a new toy, I found it so adorable for some reason.

I didn’t know why.

“Whatcha smilin’ for? Huh?” He stepped on my foot. So violent. “Quit laughin’. I know you look down on me. You’re a university grad and I’m just a hooligan. Hmmph!” He turned his nose the other way.

I wasn’t sure if he was really mad. I poked his arm.

“You’re a university graduate too. Didn’t you get that—”

“Bullshit! You’re judging me, aren’t you! Just you wait, Qian Jiying. I’m gonna even the score tonight.”

I saw that people were beginning to notice us and pulled him away.

He began telling me, a bit delightedly but also a bit shyly, that he studied like his life depended on it—computer programming,

mathematics, English and everything—all because of that “study hard” that I had said to him.

When we passed by the gates of the school, he suddenly became a bit depressed. “I could’ve made it into this place, actually, if only...”

“Huh?”

However, he didn’t continue. There were some things he was going to keep confidential after all.

Was it—

Suddenly, his phone started ringing. He had chosen the ringtone himself —*The Bund*—but it was not the chorus. He said it showed his “unique taste.”

He glanced at me before picking up the call quietly and hanging up soon after. Before I could ask, he said something came up at the company and they wanted him back.

Go then.

He bit my shoulder really hard before he left. “Just wait ‘til I get back!” He growled.

I wondered when he would get back.

And I became a bit depressed, too.

¹⁶ It is normal to call a middle-aged woman aunty. Collectivistic culture, go figure.

¹⁷ A dish is a type of siu mei that is common in Cantonese cuisine and Fujian. See below for picture.

¹⁸ Referring to Shen Changhuan (沈昌煥), a very, probably the most, famous foreign affairs diplomat.

Chapter 11

He turned up at my door early next morning. Not only did he come

back, he came back injured. He was wearing a jacket in the middle of summer and had his shoulder and arm wrapped up in bandages.

“Bodyguards, yannoe, gotta get hurt every now and then.” He made it sound like nothing.

I stared into his eyes, those shiny, black eyes.

I really wanted to ask—what kind of bodyguard is he because don’t security guards usually just stalk around in their uniform so how did he get hurt so easily and why did they have to get him who was out of town to go and how did he come back so fast and is this even a legitimate company—but I did not want him to think that I didn’t trust him.

My major was kind of related to biology but we did not need to dissect white lab rats or look at red lumps in formaldehyde. I saw some red seeping out from the white dressing and although I did not know if it was blood or disinfectant¹⁹, my heart started clenching. It felt just like the time in junior high when my old lady was diagnosed with uterine cancer.

“I’m fine, really.”

He held my hand with his uninjured left one and told me that they needed someone at Wuxi so they asked him to lead the team to protect an entrepreneur from the Northeast doing business in Wuxi. Maybe the man had enemies because they ran into trouble on their way to Shanghai.

“Those people were way too trashy. I mean they had watermelon knives. Goddamn, they seemed so legit too. I finished them all with my baton before my guys even acted.” And he got cut on the arm, not too deep though.

“Heh, the boss was a good guy though. Paid for all the medical expenses and gave me a week off with pay, too!”

“I’m fine, ge, I’m fine.”

I must have looked really bad.

Could you not work for that security company? Couldn’t you find a normal job like Lin Dongfu?

But I couldn’t say that. How could I? He wasn’t the same as Lin Dongfu and them. He had gone behind bars for killing someone. He could never be the same.

And it was *my* fault.

But, but you promised me that you wouldn’t go down the wrong path! This is not a good path, is it?

Or was I just too damn naïve even after my twenty-something years on earth?

I fixed my expression. “You rest in the shop. I got to go home for lunch but I’ll be back right after with yummy food for you.” I did not know he would be back so I promised my ma to eat lunch with some relatives who came from the country.

Immediately, he pouted. I pinched his cheeks. “Be a good boy!” I said as if I was talking to a kid, a kid who had gotten cut and beat a whole bunch of people up.

Fortunately, Ah-Fen was watching the new shop while I stayed at the old shop by myself. I closed the shop when I headed home, leaving him inside to sleep. However, we were very close with the other shop owners nearby so it was only a matter of time before my mom caught wind of him.

Perhaps I was not meant for big things because I could not get my nerves to settle down during the meal. My responses to the questions of the aunts and cousins from the country were utterly garbled nonsense and soon I gave them the excuse that something came up at the shop so I could leave. On my way out, I passed by the kitchen, tore off the two fat drumsticks from the chicken that had been stewing for a whole day, grabbed a few marinated pork feet and stir-fry veggies, poured some chicken soup and scooped out some rice. I remembered my ma saying that eating soy sauce while healing would leave a dark scar²⁰ but none of these looked like it had soy sauce so it should be fine. Eating eggs caused infections²¹ but did eating chicken also? I wasn't too sure but he could not go wrong eating the part that was injured²².

The brat still could not move his right arm. He could only have either the drumstick or the soup in his left hand but he also wanted to eat the pork feet and have some rice. He was so frustrated he was clawing at his hair.

I sniggered. "Is it good?"

"Mmm, delish." He couldn't speak clearly with a mouthful of drumstick.

I did not know what he liked but my mom was a good cook. I doubted prison food could even come close.

I held the chicken soup up for him and then fed him the rice and stripped the meat off of the pork feet. Oh boy, was he delighted. He outright dropped everything in his hand while beaming brighter than the sun. He ate until his mouth was all oily and shiny and he burped from being stuffed, but he still said he wanted to eat.

You just want me to feed you, right? You spoiled brat.

I cleaned up the table and he fell asleep on the cot. There were dark circles under his eyes. He had not slept last night and had come straight to my place after getting treated at the hospital. Must have been hard on him.

Wow. I mean I had thought not long ago that everything was over between us, that anything he did would have nothing to do with me.

How did we come to where we were today?

I felt guilty and sympathy towards him. I liked him. Did I do it with him because of that?

So was this how things were going to be from now on? He goes out and gets into danger—he might be a “bodyguard” but who really knew what would happen? —while I get worried at home. The more I thought about it the more it seemed like he was the big gangster and I was his wife, like Andy Lau and Suki Kwan, in those Hong Kong movies. Ahhh, what was I thinking about? I hid my head in my arms.

I just closed the shop, turned the TV on and stared at it for a whole afternoon. By the time he woke up, I had already brought dinner back.

With the previous experience, he merely looked at the food in front of him like a poor puppy, not even bothering to move his left hand.

Sighing, I fed him. I bet he wished he could be injured forever.

Oh, did I have to wipe him down and change his diaper too? Lai Yiu-fei enshrined Ho Po-wing but Lai Yiu-fei was the one on top and today, I-I had to... OMG!

As expected, after plenty of sleep and food, the brat tried to satisfy his remaining needs, nagging me to come to bed with a crooked smirk on his face.

I was still a bit scared even though I had already prepared lubricant ahead of time.

“C’mon!” He could not even wait another moment. “We agreed on this. You gotta keep your word!”

I hissed back, “Stop fussing. I have to take off my clothes, don’t I?” I flung off my tee and pants and, after a moment’s hesitation, my underwear, too, before standing in front of him.

“Your waist’s so skinny. And your skin’s so white.” Just look at him, drooling. That little pervert. My little pervert.

“Are we doing this or not?” I glared at him.

The fucking bastard took advantage of me with his injured arm as the excuse, making me lie down, then making me go on all-fours after I lied down and then making me stick my butt up after I got on all-fours. On the account that he was so selfless last time, I did it accordingly no matter how awkward or embarrassed I felt. But after I stuck my butt up, he slapped me, saying I didn’t stick it high enough...

Ahhhh! Objection! Foul! This position...this position... I mean the lights weren’t even out yet. My cheeks were burning.

“Are you done?” My voice even became hoarse.

“Hehe,” he snickered. “It’s ‘kay, ge, I’mma make you feel a-mazing.”

Being a young buck like him, he was still able to give me hell while wounded. Too bad for little old me.

At first, it would not go in so he asked me to reach back and spread it myself.

“Oh, c’mon, ge. You gotta work with me here. Not my fault you’re so damn tight.”

Hearing him begging me like that, I... I actually gave in and did it.

Ahhhh! Putting lubricant did nothing at all. It hurt like a bitch. All damn rapists need to be fucking hung, I say.

However, he was a little better than me.

“Only a lil’?”

Okay, okay. I admit he was a lot better. After a while, it actually got better and I was kind of feeling it. I even came from his double-sided attack.

We were both sticky with sweat and he was hugging me and kissing my neck. I was so exhausted I could not keep my eyes open. I heard him saying in my ears, “You’re so good to me, *ge*. I’mma let you fuck me, *ge*. I don’t even care if you screw me to death.”

No one wants you to die. How could I bear to see that? You just like to talk nonsense, kiddo.

He was very energetic—probably got plenty of sleep in the afternoon—and started talking to me with me in his arms.

“Ya know, *ge*, Ding Hongmei’s the only other person other than you who was ever good to me. I used to hate her guts at one point. She didn’t know how to do shit and picked the shittiest men. Now that I think ‘bout it, she still had some good left in her, pawning her necklace to get me that VCD player. If not for that player I wouldn’t’ve known ya. After I got locked up, she came to see me with some fruits and she even said she went to ask you for forgiveness. The way she looked though, she prolly got thrown out by your peeps.”

The more he said the more downcast he got but I figured it was better for him to let it out.

“I was actually so glad she found out she got cancer. I wondered why she even gave birth to me. I mean, I came into this world to get looked down on. Even my teachers rolled their eyes at me. No one played wit’ me. Not even my relatives gave a fuck. Ya know, my grades were actually pretty damn good when I first started junior high.” He suddenly paused. “But she was just a fucking whore. Couldn’t live without a man, could she? I... I...” He clung onto my shoulder for his life. “Why the fuck should I go to

school? She wanted me to so I didn't. Fuck school. I was just trash anyways. They'd just look down on me anyways."

He held my shoulder so hard that it hurt and his voice cracked more and more. I hugged his head. "Binbin, Binbin..." *Just let it out.*

Tears fell on my arm and dripped down my chest. It just kept dripping and dripping. He was shaking but I did not hear anything.

"Look at you. I let you fuck me and you end up crying. That's it. No more for you!" I attempted to joke as he began to calm down.

"I'm fine." He sniffed. "She's dead already; nothin' left of her. She never got it good. She'd pass by the mall and stare at the perfume but never got the money to buy it. They used to say she was pretty but you know how it all turned out..."

"Ge?"

"Yeah?"

"You were always on my mind when I was locked up."

He burst out laughing for some reason.

"You obviously didn't wanna rent me anythin' but you'd still give it to me every time. And you were holdin' that stupid drawer that day and you even fought with me." His recollection really rubbed me the wrong way but I probably had been really silly.

"And you stalked me to the court. You looked more worried than I was when he announced the sentence. And that one time in prison, stupid ol' you said you didn't bring anything for me and told me to study hard. The C.O. told me I had to listen to you."

He would not stop cackling.

"Then why do you like me if I'm so stupid?" I asked gravely.

"Cause you're a good person, duh." He reached down to my crotch and grabbed it. "Even better down here."

Oh, come on.

“Hear me out, Binbin, why don’t you quit this security job and come back? I’m worried.”

He did not make a sound as he concentrated on his handiwork. When he finally did, he said, “I don’t wanna be looked down on but I ain’t gonna do nothing bad.”

But it’s not like not doing bad things would keep you safe. But before I could say it, he began round two. I really had to hand it to him. Through all the crying and laughing, he never forgot to fuck his *ge*.

Author’s note

Oh yeah lol. I’ve said, I haven’t written sad stories, I don’t write any now and I won’t write any in the future.

¹⁹ The common disinfectant used in China is merbromin which stains the skin red when applied and is thus called ‘red medicine water’ in Chinese.

²⁰ Chinese folk belief.

²¹ Chinese folk belief.

²² Chinese folk belief: you should ingest the same body part of an animal to help the healing of one’s own. Ex. Eating chicken leg to help with a sprain in the calf.

Chapter 12

*B*inbin had a seven-day break but we couldn't be together.

I had to watch the shop in the day and this kind of business had no day-off to speak of. Normally, I would think that it was cool being able to do business and watch stuff at the same time but now I felt trapped. I couldn't always stay at the shop at night and Ah-Fen would come to take over my shift which meant that I had to eat dinner with my parents back home.

He, on the other hand, could only hole up in the back room and rummage through my stash of manga there because I didn't want people seeing him in the shop. If he really could not handle it, he would frolic about at his buddies' places. However, whenever I went back home at night, he would make a puffy face and ignore me starting from dinnertime, making my legs feel as heavy as lead, as if I would be a big asshole if I left.

Yeesh, dating was seriously hard. I used to worry that I would bring shame upon my parents if word got out but now I was more stressed about not being able to cling to him every second of the day and be lovey-dovey.

Why was it so hard being gay???

After seven days of suffering, I decided to buy a house and get my own den.

People really change when they are dating. I had been prepared to stick this life out as a single hermit and when I got old I would be an old hermit.

I would live in my parent's small, two-storey house and after I see them off and become immobile myself, I would sell the house and move to a nursing home. Buying a house was something I had never even considered. Even the money I saved each month was confiscated by my ma for wedding funds.

My ma said during New Year's that I had six, seven thousand in the bank. It would be enough for the down payment, right?

Once I made up my mind, I settled on a two-roomer at a new development near my shop: fourth floor, downtown area, two hundred and twelve per square meter, seventy-eight point seven square, seventeen thousand in total including all the extra fees and stuff. The salesperson was especially enthusiastic, probably had never seen another person as straightforward as me, and calculated the mortgage for me down to the cent: sixty-five hundred down payment and two hundred monthly.

I could afford it.

When I went back to ask my mom for the money, oh boy was she delighted. Her son was growing up and knew that he had to prepare a home for a family. No girl was going to marry a man with no house! I told her, it wasn't like that, but she wouldn't hear a word of it as she clamoured about something like inspecting the house for me, checking the *fengshui* and haggling for a better deal. She even said that she would pay the remaining ten thousand. In the words of my ma, what do you mean, mortgage? Us Qians aren't so poor that we need to owe money.

Luckily, my dad stopped her with a roar: Our son's hitting thirty. He can spend his own hard-earned money. You've got no business sticking your nose in, woman!

With the keys in hand, I went into my very own den. I installed lighting and activated the hydro. I bought a big, two-person bed and brought over some of my things from home. I moved in on the same day.

There was a thousand or so left in my savings. Without further hesitation, I bought a Lenovo and a cell phone.

I called him and was so excited that I couldn't speak.

"What's up? *Ge*, speak up!"

"W-we have a home now." It just rushed out of my mouth.

"Huh?"

"You know, the new development when you take a left turn from my old shop. Sixty-seven, suite 402. I bought a big bed too. The bed sheet is blue, super soft. We don't have to be hobo lovers anymore. I bought a computer too. You studied that before right..."

I said so much but I did not hear anything from the other end. I had made him cry again.

Only after we hung up did I realise that I didn't tell him I was calling from my cell.

The rascal was super busy the following months. No breaks. Cell phone was always off, too.

Looking at the new home made me feel downcast. I did not have a good time if he was not there. I couldn't cook that well either, so I ended up going back to my parents' place.

Was I being too naive?

The sound of him gasping for air was still echoing in my ears.

What was he doing? Fighting and killing people? He gave me a few calls but he never talked about his job. He just kept saying, it's good, everything is good, don't worry about him and he'll be back when he gets time. How could I not worry? My heart practically flew to Shanghai. However, I was actually quite busy with three shops to run. I did not even have time to stock up on merchandise and had to pre-order it and get it delivered.

Time usually passed super duper fast for me but during those months, a day felt like a year.

Bored out of my mind, I started using the computer.

And I became a netizen by the end of 2000.

Not long after I went online, I read *Beijing Story*²³. I had already read all of the BL novels and seen all the gay films in the shop but those were all from outside of Mainland China. The only legitimate Chinese-made gay film had to be *West Palace, East Palace*²⁴—super dark.

I did not get a wink of sleep that night.

I missed him like crazy.

You and I would never be like that! Never!

I even went on a website for gay people.

Even though I was one, I had never been in the circle. It was as if there were only the two of us in the entire world. All of a sudden, the circle was right there. Gay meet-ups were all over the place in Wuxi and Suzhou, let alone Shanghai.

He was 183 centimetres tall, good-looking, young, strong and in Shanghai.

I realised I was starting to feel self-conscious.

And I missed him even more.

Author's note

I welcome everyone to look for discrepancies. Wrote this in a rush so there probably is a lot of errors. Feel free to give me any opinions or hopes for what kind of ending you want after reading this. I will take it into consideration and alter accordingly. It won't be much more until the ending.

²³ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lan_Yu_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lan_Yu_(film))

²⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Palace,_West_Palace

Chapter 13

He did not come back for the National Day break either. As November

was approaching, I could no longer wait. Without telling him, I closed the shop and raced for Shanghai. I only called him when I got off the train.

Doo-doo-doo—he only picked up the call after what seemed like half a century. He sounded more surprised than happy when I told him I came to Shanghai, but he came right away to pick me up.

He had become a lot thinner and had bluish stubble on his chin. But, luckily, his eyes were still black and shiny and seemed to be able to pierce two holes through my face when they looked at me.

I could not help but kick him. *How can you not come back to see your ge, you heartless devil.*

He just chuckled at me and gave me a bear hug.

I had not seen him for three months. He became sturdier and there was something different about him...more ferocious.

I didn't like it. I was even a bit afraid.

He told me that he was really busy being an around-the-clock bodyguard. He had zero personal time and had to cut off all connections to the outside world most of time.

"And you're going to keep doing this?" *While I stay in my boudoir back home by myself?*

He pursed his lips. "Well, no, but I've got no choice now. I gotta do it." Seeing my silence, he put on a softer tone and made an apologetic face. "But *ge*, this is my job. I thought you wanted me to study hard and aim for the top? C'mon, don't be mad, please?"

I was so angry that I couldn't say anything. *Say, I think this job of yours isn't proper, it's bad news. I don't want you hustling around in Shanghai. I don't want to lose sight of you. I'd rather you come back and help me with my small business. I bought a house too...* But I couldn't say anything.

Who was I to tell him what to do? I was just a nobody. I turned tails and left. I was going home.

"*Ge*." He grabbed my hand. I shook it off.

"*Ge!*" He hugged me around the waist from behind, not paying heed to the crowded train station.

"What're you doing?! Let go!" I yelled.

I was about to become a dissatisfied, nagging husband. Do you know how free and happy I used to be? Now I couldn't sleep and I couldn't eat. I would look in the mirror and I'd see him, Shen Bin. I was going fucking insane from lovesickness.

Oh, but he was fine. He was fine! Like nothing was bothering him while I...

"*Ge*, don't be like this." I was about to break in half from the waist. People were beginning to notice us. "I-I... I miss you so much. I just miss you so much. I-I can't help it. I miss you so much I'm lovesick. I can't eat. I can't sleep. I see you when I look in the mirror. Really." His voice gradually became quieter, sounding quite pitiful. "I was too scared to call a lot 'cause I was scared I wouldn't be able to stop myself from going back to see you. *Ge*, please don't do this. It-it isn't on purpose..."

The moment the hot air from his words brushed my ear I lost any will to fight and instead, my heart felt warm and fuzzy. My cheeks started burning too. Not even God could help me now.

People are stupid and self-degrading, especially those who are in love. He hailed a taxi and took me to his dorm.

It was not far. He called it a dorm but actually it was one of the rooms in a two-room apartment. It was not fully furnished but it had a boiler and an air conditioner.

He bit me once we went into the room.

“You meanie, tryna leave when you just got to Shanghai. Meanie.”

I had built up some resistance and my little friend was hard. I bit him, too. *I'll bite the hell out of you.*

Then it went from biting to kissing.

Wait, the rascal was missing a tooth. But now wasn't the time to ask. His hand slid into my pants...

Then we tumbled onto the bed, got stark naked and fucked like rabbits. We even forgot to eat. We forgot it all.

We were sprawled out on the bed, exhausted. He put his head on my shoulder and soon I lost feeling in that arm. But I bore with it because he was behaving so well.

He got new injuries and even lost a tooth.

“If you keep this up for another six months or so, you're going to be like me.”

“Hmm?” He asked as he gnawed on the tender spot under my arm.

“I got twenty-eight teeth. You will, too.”

“You out of all people!” He snapped to attention and sat up, taking out a false tooth and holding it in front of my nose.

“You knocked this out. Where’s my compensation?” He even crinkled his nose at me like a difficult child.

Never knew my punch was that awesome! Hahaha!

I laughed so hard that my stomach hurt and I almost died from the wrath of his fists.

“Don’t you need to guard someone around-the-clock today?”

“I shall accompany thee at the cost of mine life.²⁵”

Whoa, the punk knew to use proverbs.

I actually felt a bit downcast after having sex. Living in two different places was no good.

He lied on top of me. “*Ge*, I’ll take care of myself and I’ll go back when I have time.”

“Who’s the client you’re protecting?” I slapped his butt.

“Whoever pays.”

Did all the bodyguards of rich people suffer this much?

“Some of them are gang bosses.” His voice dropped much lower and he watched me for my reaction.

How could I react? This was actually my best guess. “You’re just their bodyguard?”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded furiously. “Just the bodyguard. I don’t do anythin’ bad. Really. Believe me.” He looked like a sorry puppy.

Of course I believe you. Who else will?

But I... I was worried. I was honestly going to have nightmares where he gets stabbed through the chest and I would wake up shouting and fussing in the night. I was scared. But I couldn’t say it. I was his *ge*.

I did not stay in Shanghai for long. He had the boss hunting him down just because he closed his phone for twelve hours or so, and he ended up dropping me off at the train station the next day.

I thought his eyes were watery when the train left the station, as if he was never going to see me again.

Screw it, I thought, I'll pawn the shops, sell the house and move to Shanghai.

Love really made you crazy.



He suddenly called me before I could pawn my shops.

“*Ge*, I have something to do. Don’t look for me. I’m gonna turn my phone off.” His voice was pressed very low. “I’ll contact you. Take care.” His call came out of nowhere and he hung up before I could speak.

I didn’t know what to do. The line wouldn’t go through when I tried to call back. Half a month went by in a flash. I waited for his call everyday but none came.

I went to Shanghai again and it turned out that VM Security had shut down. Someone else was living in his dormitory. It was as if Shen Bin never came to Shanghai. And his phone went from “The number you have dialed is currently unavailable” to “The number you have dialed is out of service.”

Lin Dongfu and the gang didn’t know what was going on either.

It was then that I recalled his last look at the train station. Was it really the last time he was going to see me?

No.

My heart started pounding—*boom-boom-boom*.

No.

²⁵ The story goes that Zuo and Yang became close friends and they decided to see King Zhuang of Chu (? - 591 BCE). The winter was harsh and the two did not have enough to survive. Zuo gave all of his clothing and food to Yang so that his friend may reach their destination, and went into the woods to commit suicide. This is where the proverb that Shen Bin used came from. It literally means "giving (my) life (to) accompany (a) gentleman," and used to express the behaviour of risking one's all to accompany or follow someone.

Chapter 14

I lived with my heart in my mouth without news of him.

But I had to live on.

Lin Dongfu came looking for me just before January 1st. He knew that I was going crazy because of him. He pulled me out of the shop. It got quite cold at that time. He said, “Qian-ge, someone saw Shen Bin.”

“What?” I grabbed him.

“A cousin of mine said he saw him in Kunshan when he went to stock up on goods.”

“Kunshan?” I had never told Lin Dongfu in great detail what he was doing because I thought it was better safe than sorry. “Is your cousin certain? Where in Kunshan? What was he doing?”

“Hold your horses, Qian-ge.” He patted me a couple of times. “My cousin used to be in the business and knows some people. He said... He said the people Shen Bin was with were the ones you can’t afford to offend. He saw them people and he knew Shen Bin and I were buddies so he told me to be on the look-out. He also said Shen Bin was wearing sunglasses and a hat on purpose like he didn’t want nobody recognizin’ him.”

I gritted my teeth. Business? The fucking business again!

“Tell me the truth here. What do you mean ‘can’t afford to offend?’ What was he doing with them?”

He glanced at me with his brows furrowed up. "I'm worried too, Qian-ge," he started tentatively. "Those people ain't from 'round here. My cousin heard stories about one o' them before. Shot and killed people in the North. Killed a whole family, they say. I-I dunno what Bin-ge is doing with them either. We never really saw through him before. When he gets crazy..." He didn't finish.

It was cold outside to begin with and now I felt as though someone poured a bucket of water on me.

I bit my lips and cracked a smile. "Don't worry too much. Maybe your cousin mistook him. Shen Bin's a bodyguard! Plus, if that guy really did kill a whole family, he wouldn't be strutting around. He'd be on the wanted list. Maybe the word in the business was wrong!" It was to comfort him as much as it was to comfort myself.

"You don't understand. My cousin told me to not tell a soul. He even came back from Kunshan ahead of schedule. Said shit is gonna go down. I don't think it's made-up."

"Hah, what could go wrong? This isn't a movie. Don't fret. Go home." Even I found my smile to be forced.

"Kay, I'll go home then. Qian-ge, you can't tell this to anyone."

"Alright. I got it."

After I went back inside the shop, I was shivering like a leaf.

It wasn't just worry but also disappointment.

If it's real, then you, you little brat, have really let me down. What do you think you're doing? You think sending me off with brimming tears is enough? What do you take me for?

Why did you pick the dark side?

Didn't you say you wouldn't do anything bad?

I was ready to give everything up and move to Shanghai.

How could you do this to me?

I was perfectly fine, just a decent rental shop owner. I ended up getting together with you—I can't do anything about that—but you...if you keep this up...I cannot go on changing myself for you.

I could not do anything. I would be scared witless if I saw a movie about gangs. I was only a normal civilian. Damn this little brat. Maybe he had a story, a reason? Maybe he got into an accident? I couldn't stop myself from thinking and my head felt like it was about to explode. Damn him.

By the time Lunar New Year's rolled around, there was still no news of him.

Maybe that was it? Everything was just a dream?

I had no idea.



The brat was lying on the metal cot, moaning quietly.

Luckily, I had a kettle in the shop. I boiled some water and poured it down his throat when it cooled a bit. Then, I placed a cold towel on his forehead. At least I could get the fever to go down if anything.

I looked over his wounds. There were only two, really, one on the left shoulder and one on the chest. The bandaging looked professional which meant he probably came after getting treated. The blood that seeped out was most likely because the wound reopened. It had stopped now, too. All that blood really did give me a fright when he took off his clothes earlier.

He came to hide out.

He had lost even more weight and was in a bad mood, too, shouting at me when he came in earlier, "Aren't we the daredevil, opening doors in the middle of the night? You ain't got nine lives!"

His entire air had changed and he even raised his voice at me! I didn't deserve this shit!

I could not sleep though and kept changing the towel and feeding him water.

"Ge..." The brat called from the bed and tried to sit up.

Glancing at my watch, I saw that it was a quarter to five. I walked up to him. "Don't move. Just lie down!" I could not find it in myself to speak nicely.

"Ge, I..." Then he saw my stony expression and stopped.

Seeing him lick his dry lips, I poured another glass of water and held it up to his lips.

"No more, ge, just how much water did you give me? I-I wanna pee."

"You're just a fucking pain in the ass, aren't you!"²⁶ *I must have owed you something in a past life! You troublemaker.*

I usually went to the nearby public toilet at night but that didn't seem to be an option in this situation. "Hang in there. I'll take you to my place. It's close."

He puckered his lips. "Is it really? I can't hold it much longer." He began acting like a poor puppy again.

We only left after I put the army jacket that I used as a blanket over his down jacket and then wrapped a thick scarf around him. I wrote 'CLOSED FOR THE DAY' with some chalk on the shop door and retrieved my good old vintage ride. "Hop on!" I pointed at the back seat of the bicycle.

The rascal squeezed his legs together. "Geeeeee!"

He couldn't hold it.

"There's no one around. Just get it over with."

He took a glimpse at the leftover bits of firecrackers on the ground. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Peeing in front of someone’s shop at New Year’s...”

“You’re just the worst!” I parked the bike and hauled him to the public toilet. He really needed to go but the more he rushed the harder it was. He could not move his fatter, wrapped-up arm and he couldn’t get the zipper down for his life. I could almost see sweat forming on his head so I had to go over and help him with it.

And boy, did he feel good after taking a piss.

He even said as I aimed his pee for him, “*Ge*, you’re so nice.”

“Didn’t anyone teach you not to talk while peeing?” There *wasn’t* anyone to do that. I bit my lips.

“Hehe...”

“Bite down on your teeth when you pee. If you make this a habit your teeth won’t fall out when you get old.”

Seeing him clench his jaw hard, I thought to myself, I wonder if I will see him turn into an old grandpa with a full set of teeth.

After drinking so much water, then peeing and sweating it out, the fever went down quite a bit and his forehead wasn’t as hot. He got on my bike and wrapped his arms around my waist. The night was dark and the wind howled, hurting a bit when it hit my cheeks. I freed a hand to cover his. Had to keep my little troublemaker warm.

I suddenly thought of *The Chronicles of the Shadow Swordsman*²⁷ and how Zhang Danfeng and Yun Lei wished for the road they were walking on to never come to an end.

Ah...

We arrived at my den. Too bad there were only a bed and a few things here and there.

The brat was peeping up and down when I was opening the door but he froze when he went in. I gave him a shove. “Take your clothes off. I’m going to get the blankets ‘cause you need to lie down. The bed might be moist ‘cause it hasn’t been used for a long time. I’ll look for a heating pad. I think I brought one over...” I suppose the nagging gene was passed onto me.

I found the heating pad and held it and the blankets in my arms. He was still frozen in place.

I saw him rubbing at his eyes.

Why didn’t you come back earlier when you knew about this all along?

“This is our home?” He plopped onto the bed and bounced up and down excitedly. “Is this one o’ those king size beds? Wicked!” That sick puppy was nowhere to be found.

I was angry. “It’s *my* home. Not our home.”

I thought he would pout and throw a tantrum but he stiffened and tucked his head in. His longish hair blocked his eyes.

I did not know what to do. “Um... Go ahead and take the cover off. It’s your first time sleeping at our home.”

But he slid off the side of the bed and crouched there, head buried in between his knees. The army jacket fell to the floor and he was shivering. Before long, I could hear sobs.

“Don’t do that, Binbin, don’t. I was just kidding with you. Your *ge* was just kidding. This is your home. Whose home could it be if not yours?” I crouched down too, and held his head in my arms. It was the first time that I heard him cry. My heart ached.

He looked up. His face was completely soaked. “I’m sorry. *Ge*, I’m—” He clenched his teeth. More tears came out.

“I’m just glad you’re back. Don’t leave again. Just stay here. It doesn’t matter even if you don’t do a thing. Yeah? I’ll care for you.”

“Really?” His eyes were watery and they reminded me of that look at the train station, that look like he was never going to see me again.

“*Ge*, I like you from the bottom of my heart. Can I be your little brother again in the next life?”

Next life? I stood up.

“Can I?” I saw despair in his young eyes.

“You listen to me here, Shen Bin. Don’t think you can go out hustling again now that you’re back!” I shouted. “Don’t go hustling when you call me *ge*. What did you promise me? That you wouldn’t go down the wrong path. But look at yourself. It’s only been half a year and look what you’ve gotten yourself into!” I really regretted it. I should have kept him with me.

“I didn’t do nothin’ bad,” he said quietly but surely.

“Then tell me, what were you doing with the murderer who killed an entire family?”

I was only testing him but he got nervous. “What do you know, *ge*, and how do you know?”

My heart lost its temperature when I saw his expression. It was real.

“What is done by night appears by day.”

“This isn’t a joke, *ge*. I won’t ask how you found out. You just need to pretend you never knew, and pretend you don’t know me.” His expression changed, his eyes changed, becoming as sharp as a knife. “I needa go.”

Before he could get up...

Slap!

I smacked him across the face and blood seeped out from the corner of his lips right away.

“You bastard. Who are you selling your life for? Is it murder or arson or drugs or bank robbery? You just got out. If you get caught again, you’ll get the death sentence. Don’t you understand? Who’s going to save you then? Huh?”

I grabbed his jaw roughly. I just wanted to strangle him.

He stared at me dumbly. I must have always been too gentle with him.

“Even if you owe someone a favour, you can repay them with money or your life, but you can’t repay them with someone else’s money or someone else’s life. That’s a crime. Do you understand?” I thought he just needed some education. “Shen Bin, if you still see me as your *ge*, swear that you won’t go.”

He didn’t say anything and just closed his eyes.

Perhaps it was just as Lin Dongfu had said. None of us really saw through him. Even I had no idea what he was thinking.

Was this the real him whom I knew?

Was he really going to commit murder and arson and—

He opened his eyes. “No one can save you in this society. Only you can save yourself.”

He was so calm it scared me. It was then that I remembered, this was a person who had beaten another person to death.

“Yannoe, Qian Jiying, you people who go to senior high and university talk about dying when you get hit a few times, or you can’t find a job, or you get called a few names. You think I’d ask you for help?” I watched as he stood up and began stripping. He did it quickly and roughly, and the wounds began bleeding again. He pointed at the scar on his back the size of a bowl. “Ding Hongmei’s man did this with an iron when I was thirteen. Believe me, the sizzling sound and smell of burning human flesh is not somethin’ you can ever forget. Ding Hongmei got tied to the bedpost by him and he pierced her all over with rusted metal rings from the curtains. I’d come back from school and he’d fuck me. I wasn’t even 160 cm tall. I wasn’t his match. He fucked me right in front of Ding Hongmei.”

“Tell me, who was there to save me?”

“He brought home the bread. We were living in his house, eating his food. My mom was his whore and I was the buy-one-get-one-free.”

“He whipped me with coat hangers. Stuck whatever he could find into me. No one ever bothered to ask when I went to school with a limp. Even my own grandpa and grandma treated me like a dirty piece of shit. Who was there for me to depend on?”

“I was only in eighth grade. Ding Hongmei was more pathetic than me, so I had to take her place ‘cause if she died from his fucking then it’d be game over for me.”

“If that son of a bitch hadn’t been drunk that night and I hadn’t stabbed his fucking cock with his taser, I’d be long dead.”

“Ding Hongmei insisted that I didn’t testify. I was young. I still had to go to university. *Hahahaha...* Yanno, that son of a bitch only got five years. Ding Hongmei got a fucking hole in her womb...”

“I was only eighteen, nineteen when he came out. We still had to live in his house. I was so scared, so scared I couldn’t live at home. Who was there to save me? Only myself. The me now, I can kill him with my own two hands, so I don’t gotta be scared. Committing a crime? Still better than getting burned by an iron.”

He told his story while sitting against the bed, topless and emotionless, as though the story was not about himself.

It was probably his first time telling it.

I had thought before that his abusive stepfather had... But the reality and my own speculations were completely different.

I felt like I could not breathe.

He was in grade eight when I had just entered university. I was in a strop with my dad because I didn’t get into a good school. I was gloomy because of the major I got. I was depressed because I was gay. Even now, after all these years, I was still pretty useless. I couldn’t do anything.

He had let me fuck him. He had been shaking like a leaf on the cot. I had been feeling good.

He had beaten the rapist to death in the detention center. My family had arranged that rapist.

He said that he didn't want people looking down on him and that he wouldn't do anything bad.

He always said that I spoiled him, that I was good to him. What had I done though?

I did not have the right to pity him. I wasn't as strong as he. I could not have helped him even if I knew him before. That was why I needed to make him stay and treat him well with everything I had.

I wrapped him in the blanket. Didn't want it to turn into pneumonia in this cold weather. He was quite compliant, probably was too tired from the wounds, the fever and then the speech. Next, I sat down beside him, too.

"Thirsty? I'll go boil some more water. You're still running a fever."

He turned to look at me with his bright, black eyes, but quickly faced another way. "Don't pity me. I'll just pretend I got bit by a stray dog."

"Yeah, you got bit by me, alright."

He turned back around and this time his eyes were reddish. "You know that ain't what I meant. I did it on my own free will."

I took him into my arms. He was pretty fat wrapped in blankets.

"Didn't you want me to keep spoiling you? Stay and I'll spoil you with love."

He spoke with his voice muffled in my chest. "You're a good person and I really like you, so all the reason for me not to hurt you. I actually thought about it. Me and you can't happen. I'm bad and you're good. You got parents and a proper business. And what am I? I'd never been loved and I'm happy now that I got some from you. I snuck out this time 'cause I just

wanted to see you. Don't worry about me anymore. I wish you a good life after I leave. That girl, Ah-Fen, is pretty nice to you—"

I blocked his mouth with mine.

He still had a fever and his mouth was unusually warm.

As we kissed, he began crying again.

Actually, he didn't look half-bad when he cried—like a bunny.

"You want me to slap you again?" One of his cheeks was already swollen from my slap. I licked at his tears gently. "What the hell are you saying? I'm gay and there's nothing more to it. If you don't come back, I'm going to be widowed."

"But I..." he paused. "My current boss is really nice to me. The old son of a bitch wasn't released yet when I went in. It was this boss who got his peeps to finish him."

"That's just to use you. And now you're risking your life for him?" *I see.*

He shook his head. "He's a real brother, I'm telling you. He didn't force me."

What an idiot. Of course he didn't force you. He had you willingly jumping into his trap.

"What have you done for him? Tell me the truth."

"Nothin', really. He doesn't let me do anythin' illegal. I just guard a few of the important figures and I don't really get injured. You just always see it every time I do. This time I was protecting the boss from..." He took a glimpse at me and stuck out his tongue without finishing.

Protecting? From what, bullets? Or knives? Who did he think he was? Jet Li or Jackie Chan?

He never thought about spending the rest of his life with me. He just wanted a 'had-been' and not a 'will-be.'

I held my breath. I was not very happy. Judging from what he told me, this boss of his avenged him and gave him a job, and he was super

grateful. Why was that man so nice to him? Could it be that he had some feelings...?

Fuck! How could I be jealous at a time like this?

His fever came back again stronger than before, which was good. Better that he lied in bed sick so I can keep him under my watch for a week or two.

I didn't want to leave so I called Ah-Fen after tucking him in and asked her to buy some fever medication, antibiotics, gauze and disinfectant. The girl tried to nag, to which I gave a piece of my mind. I also threatened to kick her back to the countryside if she were to blab to my ma.

He took the meds and the fever went down after a day's sleep. He was young after all.

Then I made Ah-Fen bring over some rice, side dishes and hot congee. Her eyes kept dancing past me into the house.

Annoyed, I said, "It's your sister-in-law inside. You're welcome to say hi!"

"Wait, what?" Her jaw dropped open. She wanted to say something else but was too scared to, so she left.

I fed him some congee and then changed his dressing. A gunshot wound on the left shoulder, a knife wound on the chest. I felt so bad and so angry. That motherfucking ungrateful son of a bitch only knew to use kids. That piece of shit!

"What d'you say?"

"Nothing. You just sleep."

"Kay." He was such a good kid when sick. "Ge?" he called whiningly.

"Ge, will you not like me if I take the bad path?"

I really wanted to say: Of course not. However, he had already gone down the wrong path, hadn't he? Could I not like him, not spoil him, if he really went into the bad business and killed people?

I didn't answer and he didn't ask again.

The bed was big so I went on and cuddled with him. He hugged me back and even snuck his hand down my pants like a naughty child.

“Watch it!”

He just laughed.

Nonetheless, he had no energy in him and quickly dozed off again. His hand was still clasped on mine when I got up to pee in the middle of the night. I moved it off lightly but he grabbed it again. “*Ge*, don't go. Don't go.”

I stayed awake with all I had but still fell asleep later in the night. I thought to myself, I'll have a good talk with him tomorrow or the day after and make sure he stays.

When I woke up the next morning, however, there was nobody beside me.

²⁶ This is a folk saying, literally meaning “bad people pee and poo more.”

²⁷ A TV drama based on the novel by the writer Liang Yusheng, called *Pingzong Xiaying Lu* or *The Wanderer Chronicles*.

Chapter 15

He had gone but perhaps not far. I flung the blanket away and sprinted out in slippers.

How could I have just fallen asleep? Fuck me. Why didn't I strip him naked and tie him to the bed?

I knew I wouldn't be seeing him again if I did not find him this time. He came back to see me for the last time. He rushed back before his injuries could heal because he couldn't leave me hanging. He must have gone to do something big, or maybe he had already done it?

But judging from what he said yesterday, he probably hadn't yet.

I ran outside as I tried to think with my half-awake head straight until the main road.

It was only six or seven in the morning. A few people saw me running around like a mad man in cotton pajamas in the middle of winter and began pointing and whispering—which psych ward is this guy from?

I don't see him. Where did he go?

Shen Bin, you little shit. Damn you. I... I'll fucking kill you.

Only after I crouched down did I notice how cold it was.

I went back to get dressed, went to the ATM to withdraw some cash and took a taxi heading to the train station. I had to find him. I asked the driver on the way how much it cost to go to Shanghai. The driver said twenty-five bucks but the price was double during the New Year's season. Habitually,

I drove a hard bargain and struck the deal at thirty-five. I wondered if that rascal also took a taxi to Shanghai and if he also haggled.

I called home saying I was going to stock up. “There’s a new release. Super hard to get. Uh-huh. Yeah. Only in Shanghai. I might not even get it today. Might come home the day after. I’m staying at my old classmate’s place. Hmm. Yeah, carpool. Yeah, saves me the money for the trip there.”

I hung up. I recalled what Binbin had said. He was younger but he considered more.

I had parents whom I constantly worried about and who lived because of me. He never thought about long-term for the two of us, so it was not surprising that he had been so brave and straightforward with his courting... I dozed off thinking about this.

I got off at the new bus station in Shanghai. His company and dorm were the only places to begin the search. A drowning man takes his chances with a straw. It was the same as it had been before New Year’s. The entire building where the company had been was closed. The dorm had new tenants.

I knew finding him was nearly impossible, but I had to do *something*.

How could I have let him leave me? How could I have lost him? My parents aside, he was the dearest person in my life. I had to wait. Even if he committed a crime, he might run back to me or get locked up again or...

I sat down at ‘Cockadoodle’ across from his dorm and ordered a half a kilo of white cut chicken. I ate and I ate. It never seemed to run out. Eating with him last last time in Shanghai seemed just like yesterday. He had even taken out his cell... His cell phone!

I called that number of his that had been out of service for a long time. I was clutching at that piece of straw.

It went through. My heart stopped beating.

A man picked up. His voice was hoarse and he asked me before I could say anything, “Lookin’ for Shen Bin?”

“Yes. And you are....”

“Wait in front of VM Security’s building.”

The call ended.

I was a bit stunned. Was it the gangs? All my knowledge on gangs was limited to movies. The most recent one was *The Longest Nite*: Tony Leung peeling nails off and chopping fingers... *Brrr*.

I waited for two hours in front of the building I had gone to at noon. No one came for me and it was so damn cold. I tried calling again—‘the number you have dialed is currently unavailable.’ I had to keep waiting though, so I bought some bread and hard-boiled eggs at the convenience store to fill my stomach. Dammit. I was only halfway through that chicken!

Another two hours passed. This place wasn’t a busy area and it was cold, so there weren’t many people out on the streets. I looked down at my watch. It was almost ten o’clock.

Are they blowing me off? Playing a joke on me?

Where’s Binbin?

My face had gone numb from the wind. Shuffling around did not help. I was just thinking about buying some more food when a small van pulled over. The door opened when it passed by. I was pulled in. The door closed. The car left.

It really was like a movie.

The A/C inside was very warm. It was probably remodeled. The front was separate from the back and there were two rows with three seats each row facing each other with a space in the middle. The one who pulled me in was a tall, lanky man. He pushed me down in a seat in the front row and sat down beside me.

A small light flicked on once I sat down and I saw there was a man sitting across from me. He didn't look out of the ordinary: buzzcut, small eyes, tall nose, a bit of freckles on the face, a black tee inside a leather jacket, about thirty years of age. He didn't have much of an expression though, so it looked like he was meditating or something.

"Who're you?" He scrutinized me. It was the voice of the man who answered my call.

"I'm Qian. I'm Shen Bin's friend."

"The one who sell videos?" Still no expression.

"Not sell, rent..."

"You the one who got Bin-*zi*²⁸ locked up?"

"No, I..."

"*No*?" His small eyes jeered at me but his face still showed no emotions. I didn't continue.

"What do ya want Bin-*zi* for?"

I remembered what Binbin told me so I kept it to a minimum. "He came back to see me but then suddenly left so I came looking for him."

"He went to see ya, you who made him go in the slammers, instead o' choppin' ya up?" The corners of his lips curved upward.

"I didn't do it on purpose. We're actually on pretty good terms." My words trailed off weakly.

He didn't look at me anymore and instead began to crack his knuckles—*crack, snap, crack...*

"Ya needa tell the truth." He looked up again and gave me a scare. His eyes were pinned on me and I felt like I could not catch my breath. I was useless, wasn't I?

Was this the big brother whom Binbin was grateful for?

I gulped and was about to—

"I wanna hear the truth," he reminded me as he crossed his legs.

“Shen Bin came looking for me on the third day of the New Year, wounded and running a fever. He left before he got better so I came to check on him.”

He closed his eyes. I was just about to ask where Shen Bin was when the man beside me stuck something against my waist. I took a look and it was a gun—a gun!

“Better be honest with us, punk.”

“I *am* telling the truth.” My voice shook. I know, I was spineless but I couldn’t help it.

It was *a gun* after all.

The car came to an abrupt halt. I didn’t know where we were. What were they going to do? Silence me and throw me into the Huangpu River? What about Shen Bin? What about him?

“What do you guys want? I’m just looking for Shen Bin. I want to take him back.”

The man across me stood up. “He ain’t got parents, or kids or nobody. Where’s he gonna go?”

“He keeps getting hurt being a guard and he was just released. I didn’t want him to get locked up again for doing something bad, so I was going to find him a job. It-it’d be better than working out here.”

The man didn’t speak. I had no idea what he was thinking. The gun on my waist had not moved the whole time and my cotton shirt was sticking to my skin because of the cold sweat. I thought of my ma and pa. If I died, that would be three lives gone.

He still had a blank expression as he stared at me. “Shen Bin came to me today sayin’ that he doesn’t wanna roll with me no more.”

He doesn’t wanna roll no more? He came back because he didn’t want to keep doing this? Because of me?

The man gave the tall guy beside me a look. “Show ‘im what you got there on ya.”

The tall guy faltered for a second before taking something out from a bag and throwing it on the floor.

It was a finger. It was still bloody.

“Bin-zi chopped it off his right hand.” The man wiggled his index finger. “Without this he can’t shoot, useless. What the hell did ya do that he’d come back and do this to himself?”

The thing on the floor was his index finger.

He had asked me last night, ‘*Ge*, will you not like me if I take the bad path?’

I lunged for his finger. Perhaps it could still be reattached. He had it hard enough. He couldn’t become crippled on top of that. It was all my fault. It was all those assholes’ fault!

The tall guy yanked on my clothes to pull me up. I do not know where I got the energy from, I even forgot he had a gun, and kept thrashing around, waving my left hand at him and picking up the finger from the floor with my right.

It was kind of cold.

Pain shot through my scalp. The tall guy switched to yanking on my hair. He kneed me in the stomach and I felt as if my insides were being stirred around. I thought I was probably not going to make it out alive today. With his cold finger in my grasp, I suddenly had the thought when the pain was about to kill me, that maybe, perhaps Binbin wasn’t compliant so they... If not, where did they get the SIM card? Then I had called at the right time so now they were going to get rid of loose ends.

Had I put him in danger again?

Was he dead?

The doom overwhelmed me. I clawed at the man pulling on my hair and escaped his grasp. I headed for the culprit across from me. Yes. Him.

Before I took one step, something hit my mouth—the grip of the gun—and knocked out a tooth. I fell to the floor after another kick.

I spat the tooth out. It didn't even hurt.

That's right. Binbin, he... He had been killed by them.

He was dead.

Now they were going to kill me.

He was dead.

I fell into chaos. Something had snapped in my head. "You scumbags. He was a kid who never had a single good day in his life and you make him put his life on the lines for you. *There is honour amongst thieves*. Yeah right! Just a bunch of horseshit. You motherfuckers. You make him sell his life to you by doing him a few favours and then you kill him when he doesn't want to keep working for you. You coldblooded bastards. You damn devils. I curse you, I curse your whole family, all to hell. You bastards. Motherfuckers. You all burn in hell. Fuck you..."

I don't know what I said. I probably had never screamed so many profanities in my life. I don't think they could hear me clearly either. I cried while I cursed them. I cried especially loud. I bawled my eyes out and my face was wet with tears and snot. I had never cried so much in my life either. I felt so bad that I wanted to tear my insides out. I had wanted to spoil him with my love for the rest of my life.

It's all nothing—my ma and pa, the rental shops, the bad and the good—none of it matters, as long as you're alive.

I held onto his finger.

I'll do anything as long as you're alive. I don't need anything else.

As long as you're alive.

Wahhhhhhhh.

No one gave a damn about me as I screamed and wept.

I was pulled up by the hair. The devil was crouching right in front of me, smiling.

“Why ya howling like that? Someone lost their mommy and daddy?”

You fucking son of a bitch.

I cried so much that I couldn't think clearly and I swung my fist out. And I think I actually hit him since he covered his mouth. Alright. I got him.

Then, I got hit on the back of my head. My nose knocked onto the floor. There was something warm. It was bleeding.

“The fuck you howling for? The boss ain't said Bin-zi is dead,” the tall guy spat.

“Get out first,” the devil demanded.

Not dead. He wasn't dead.

I was stupefied.

I squeezed the finger that had become a bit warm. It was still reattachable. It was reattachable within twenty-four hours.

Wait a second. I remembered when Binbin licked his fingers when he was eating chicken, his fingers were long and slender. When I fucked him, I had held his hand under mine; it was longer than mine. But the finger in my hand now was short and fat. Also, there were thick calluses. Binbin didn't have any. His fingers were smooth.

I threw the finger on the ground and yelled at the devil who sat back down. “This isn't Binbin's finger. What did you do to him?”

The man just laughed. His face was swollen from my punch and he was laughing.

“How can you tell?” he asked.

I slowly propped myself up. I was hurting all over. “What's it to you? This isn't his finger. Where is he?”

“You’re about to die and you still care about ‘im?”

He lit a cigarette out of nowhere, took one puff and passed it to me.

What the hell?

But I still took it from him and took a few puffs which calmed me down.

“You’re,” he paused and continued when he saw that I was looking at him, “Bin-*zī*’s boyfriend, ain’tcha?”

Boyfriend? Was it that obvious? I turned my head away.

“The fuck you being shy about?”

Would they use me to blackmail Shen Bin? “I’m his *ge*. What are you talking about?”

The man chortled as he lit another cigarette and sucked on it.

What was so funny? Maybe it was because I smoked his cigarette, but I kind of thought he might have not been so...

“And here I was thinking to myself.” He took another cigarette out, lit it and spat out a cloud of smoke.

“All these years I’ve been in the South, hmmph, I ain’t never seen a real man. Not one had guts. Shen Bin, though, he got guts.”

“My illness started actin’ up in the slammer and he saved me. I told ‘im I could bust ‘im out and in exchange, he’d work for me outside. He said no way. Then when I found out ‘bout his shit afterwards, I got someone to get rid of that piece of trash. He still didn’t wanna work for me though. Tsk, good for ‘im!”

Judging from his expression, he really thought highly of Binbin.

“But soon, outta nowhere, he told me he’d work for me and asked me to bust ‘im out ASAP. I guessed he wanted to take revenge on ya ‘cause you visited him that one time.”

“Boy, it took a long time. Took lotsa effort too, gettin’ him out. Had to set the place on fire and then put it out and send out bribes, the whole

works. He went back home after he got out but I ain't seen him take no revenge."

I bit my lips.

The little brat. The little brat.

It was all for me.

"He's helped me lots. Took a bullet for me just before New Year's. Saved my ass again."

He blew out lots of rings of smoke. The car wasn't big to begin with and the air became foggy. He rolled down the window. It was pitch black outside but I could still see that we were definitely by the river.

After a while, he turned to look at me again, studying me. "What's so good about ya? Is fuckin' ya better than fuckin' a bitch? What does he see in ya?"

His words made me feel uncomfortable. Dammit. What was the big deal?

"I owe 'im. He's like a brother. I won't let 'im follow me anymore." He rolled the windows back up and came up to me. He grabbed my jaw roughly and stared into my eyes. "You needa stick with 'im from now on. Be good to 'im. He ain't got family. He only got himself."

My eyes got wet. Maybe this man was actually real to him. His eyes were filled with sorrow when he said 'he only got himself.'

I nodded furiously.

He had gotten off the car too and soon, he and the tall guy went back on. The tall guy even patted me on the head. "Sorry, Bin-zl's loverboy."

I got abandoned by the river.

I was aching all over and my consciousness was staticky like I was dreaming. They probably had originally planned to kill me.

I couldn't stand up so I just stayed there for a while. Soon, he came.

He hoisted me up and began crying when he saw how messed up I was.

I realised we both were crybabies.

I grabbed his hand and studied it. There was a new wound on his right index finger.

“Brother said whoever didn’t wanna go with him can just pretend to not know him after New Year’s but he’d have to get rid of his trigger finger. I-I’d planned to... he’s a real man so I’d wanted to go but... And when I brought the knife down, he stopped me.”

I held him tight.

Everything you did was for me.

“What did you all do for him?”

He took a moment to gather his thoughts before telling his story.

That boss had wanted to go clean and run a security company but it was still borderline illegal. He had a wife in the Northeast but always kept it a secret because he didn’t want people to hurt her. Then, last August, his wife got murdered. He decided to go back north to avenge her.

“Yannoe, Sister was pregnant. They raped her before killin’ her and even took pictures. After they killed her, they ripped out the baby. Brother and Sister were really close.”

“Those people knew Brother would hunt them down so they hired a gunman to gun him down. That’s why I became his bodyguard.”

“Brother didn’t let me go with him and he kicked everyone close to him away. I just found a bunch of murderers and people with nothin’ left to lose to go up north with him.”

I didn’t tell him everything. I think the boss originally wanted him to go along. He didn’t have anything left to lose either, and he was fierce and willing to risk his life. The boss knew he was a loyal guy so he said that on purpose to let him walk right into the trap.

But the boss had a sorry life too, for sure.

He had let us go in the end. His eyes had some humanity left in it.

“Ge, he called sayin’ that he was sorry. He didn’t know you were my...”

“Boyfriend.” I finished his sentence. I felt absolutely wonderful seeing him blush. ‘Boyfriend,’ so what? No harm came to that title.

“Thank goodness I was your boyfriend. If not, they would’ve butchered me into pieces.”

He pursed his lips. “If he killed you, I’d fuck him over.”

Then it occurred to me that the boss probably let me go because he knew that Binbin would.

But I was really happy and the tiny bit of jealousy that I had towards the boss disappeared without a trace.

Heehee. The brat only liked me.

Heehee.

Author’s note

It’s ‘happy-happy’ from here on out. Teehee.

²⁸ A suffix for single syllable names to convey the higher status of the speaker. 子 (zi3) literally means child or son.

Chapter 16

I had more confidence than I had ever had.

After knowing what was most important to me, I didn't make any more wild speculations.

My face was puffy like a marshmallow so I couldn't go to a hotel. After some consideration, I decided to go back but I could only hide out in the new den until my face could be shown around town.

Binbin kept cussing out the tall guy who hit me. "That motherfucker. To think I washed his socks and made roast pork for him. Ungrateful son of a bitch. Goddammit. If I ever get my hands on him again, I swear I'm gonna bust his balls. Fuck..."

He didn't do it on purpose and he even apologized to me, which was thanks to you. But before that—

"Hey, how come you've never washed my socks or made roast pork for me?"

He glared at me and nudged the bruises on my stomach really hard.

"Ah! Help! Someone's trying to kill his Romeo!"

The more I yelled the more he became worked up, and he even began to pinch my marshmallow face. I was grimacing and gasping from the pain.

My little devil, my troublemaker, I'm waving the white flag, okay?

"Hey, stop. Please. Hey, I've already lost my good looks."

He held my cheeks between his fingers and demanded angrily, “Say that again? Who’s Romeo?”

“You. You are!”

Only then did he smile. He patted me a few times and snuck a few kisses. “Ge, you’re such a good boy.”

Hmmph! It’s never too late for revenge. Plus, you’re Romeo and I’m Romeo too. There’s no conflict there.

He really ended up cooking for me. The first bite of the sweet and sour ribs made my jaw drop. Yum! Even better than my mom’s! But then why hadn’t he done more at home? I recalled that gross bowl of instant noodles —ewwww.

“Me cooking for Ding Hongmei? Maybe in her dreams.” He sure knew what I was thinking.

Well, you could have cooked for yourself. Idiot.

The getaway only lasted two days before I had to open the shop for business and report my current status back to the mothership. My cell phone had been getting so many calls the past two days while I had to pretend that I was in Shanghai waiting for merchandise. It was exhausting.

I asked him to watch the shop for me. He didn’t say much. I supposed he gave it the a-okay?

I topped twice that night.

He lied on top of me limply, mumbling, “I got some money saved up. I don’t need you to provide for me.”

I fondled the tender meat on his butt while he was vulnerable. “I provide for you? You wish!”

“But if I watch the shop for you, your family...” He licked my nipples and then squeezed them before looking at me. “Uncle and Auntie Shen...”

Uncle. Auntie.

He called my pa and ma, uncle and auntie.

He called his mom Ding Hongmei.

“Don’t you worry.” *I won’t let anyone bully you. I prepared for the worst case scenario.*

I rubbed his head so he would rest assured.

He didn’t make a sound for a while. “*Ge*, we can’t let them know about us.”

I know, I said to myself, let’s keep it a secret.

It was just that my old lady would start to see Binbin around all the time. She wouldn’t think about homosexuality but she never liked Binbin.

“*Ge*, how ‘bout I bring you home tomorrow?”

I looked at him. The room was actually really dark but I still saw his black, shiny eyes.

I held his hand.

Really tightly.

He and I went home together the next day.

I discovered that maybe I had not really known the ma who had raised me for twenty-seven years, until that day that is.

I wrote a whole script, said I got in a fight with the video merchant and even went to the police station and it was Shen Bin who saved me.

That was the first time that my mom actually met Shen Bin. She didn’t say much and was even polite.

Shen Bin called her aunty and he did it very sweetly.

And when my old man came back from his stroll, Shen Bin called him uncle and he did it very solemnly.

I’ve always been curious. He would sometimes be full of shit but other times he would be so nice and quiet that he seemed to be another person.

How much of him had I not seen? But I wasn’t in a hurry. I had all the time in the world.

After he left, my mom was surprised and asked me, “Was that Shen Bin?” But she spoke again before I could answer, “Doesn’t look like a murderer to me.”

I had planned for the worst case scenario.

I told my mom that I felt sorry for him, that he wasn’t a bad person, that he had gone through a lot, and that he was my friend, my little brother. I told her that he didn’t have any family and was alone in Shanghai so I asked him to come back and help me.

My ma, she went to do my laundry without saying anything, and then she helped me change my medication. I added that the person who had been changing it was Binbin.

Afterwards, before going to sleep, she said, “You’re old enough now and these friends are yours anyways. This Shen Bin guy doesn’t look like he’s up to no good. He was really good with his fists before, so no one would mess around in your shops if he’s around.”

“Plus, you’ve always been introverted. I’d never seen you bring a friend home. The society’s a complicated place. It’s not bad to make friends with people from different backgrounds, but I’m just worried that the honest old you would get pushed around by others. If Shen Bin wants to be with you, then that means he got some sense in him. If our son isn’t a good person then I don’t know who is.”

I knew very well that what she meant by ‘Shen Bin wants to be with you’ wasn’t in that sense, but I was still happy. I might not ever get their blessings but an ambiguous one like this wasn’t so bad either.

After, she went on to saying how it was sad for him to have a mother like Ding Hongmei. It turned out that Shen Bin’s real dad died on the battlefield in Vietnam.

How come I had never heard him mention it?

Of course, she still told me to be careful.

She had always been scared that Shen Bin came to take revenge. She said that she never thought this kid would be this sweet, and that if she knew she wouldn't have asked that second brother for that favour.

What comes around goes around. If she had not done that extra thing, I wouldn't have my Binbin now.

My pa said to me, his woman only had her baby son in her heart. Whoever was nice to her son was her family; whoever was bad to her son was her enemy.

Perhaps most mothers are like this?

Several months went by in peace.

Shen Bin and I lived in the new place, watching the shop by day and going home by night.

He went over to my house whenever he got the time. Auntie this, auntie that—he made my mom a happy woman.

Sometimes I couldn't go back, he would invite himself over. He would go grocery shopping with my mom, help her in the kitchen, chitchat about everyday gossip with her and even play mah-jong with the old ladies when they were missing a fourth player.

I had never known how to display filial affection. I had always been doted on heavily by my mom. I would reach out and there would be clothes; I would open my mouth and there would be food. I even learned to talk back when I grew up.

Before long, I became jealous. How come my twenty-something-year relationship with my mom couldn't even compare to Shen Bin's hundred-day-or-so relationship with her?

I questioned the little brat, "Where did you learn to suck up like that?"

The little brat retorted, "Why would I need to suck up with mom?" He lowered his head and told me that he never had a mom this good.

I felt pretty guilty.

I never thought my mom was that good. My mom didn't have much education. She was naggy, stingy, biased and sometimes harsh.

To which the little brat said, "Aunty is good. She is so good to me. She even makes underwear for me."

It used to be my shirt. My ma noticed that I wasn't wearing it anymore and wanted to remake it into boxers, which I outright rejected. In the end, the little brat began to wear the shirt-turned-underwear around day in and day out, even flashing it in front of the mirror and asking me if it looked good.

Hey, why don't you just hurry to bed? If your ge gets a nose bleed, you're going to have to pay for the dry cleaning. Thank you very much.

My pa praised him, saying he who recognizes his wrongs is virtuous. I swear my pa almost changed his name to Shen Guo²⁹, middle name, Gaizhi³⁰.

The little brat stood there, tall and stern—he got scared by the old tricks that my pa liked to pull. He came back saying, "Uncle is really knowledgeable. He reads these really thick books." He told me that most of the characters he couldn't even read and even if he did, he didn't understand what they meant.

It was just *Guwen Guanzhi*³¹ in traditional characters. Geez.

Then, the brat started learning Classical Chinese with my pa and tested me when he came back home, "What's the line before 'the autumn water connected the sky at the horizon, forming a unity'³²?"

Oh my god, let's spend more time discussing the issue of who will be on top instead, please.

I really didn't expect it to turn out like this.

Around the end of April, a shooting called the April 23rd Murder took place in Fushun, Liaoning, and shocked the entire country. The criminals

acted five times in one week, killing six families, totalling twenty-two people, not even sparing the children and elderly.

Complete wipe-out.

Binbin said, that was the way his boss did things, quick and fierce like the lightning, never leaving loose ends.

Then there was no follow-up. It was likely going to become another one of the Republic's unsolved cases, just like the '96 Ripper Case in City N³³.

And I was proven wrong again.

The case was solved and some reporter wrote a documentary novel based on it. The three felons were all shot on sight, including the boss who gave me a smoke.

But the boss' episode did not just end like that.

Before Labour Day³⁴, I received a registered mail for Shen Bin. The letter went to my shop—thank goodness my shop was a pretty recognizable icon. It was from some real estate company in Shanghai, asking Binbin to go over and do a home inspection.

We had no idea what was going on but we went anyway. The company was in Pudong³⁵. They said their development had been finished for a long time and our unit was the only one who hadn't done an inspection yet. The lady asked us for the pre-sale contract but how could we possibly have it? But Shen Bin had his I.D. card and residence registry. He was even going to take out his certificate of discharge. The brat told a beautiful lie: the house caught on fire and it was burnt.

Fortunately, the company had the contract. The lady said there were eight in total. The signature on it was Binbin's.

We paid the inspection fee of a couple hundred bucks and went to inspect the house. Three bedrooms, two living rooms, six hundred twenty-five per square. The place was across from Century Park³⁶.

The lady was about to scam after giving us the keys.

I called her back, “That’s it? He gets the house?”

“Oh right, we will contact you regarding the property ownership certificate. There’ve been cases like yours. It’s more of a hassle but it’s not a big problem.”

I stared at Binbin and Binbin stared back at me.

The brat said he kind of remembers signing these papers. The boss told him to sign for insurance and he did it.

“What if you signed a slave contract instead?” I fumed.

The little brat was more furious than I. “I can read, you know. It’s a property contract, not a slave contract.”

“Then why didn’t you say so?”

“How should I remember?”

His boss actually gave him a house.

I got angrier; well, jealous more like it.

“Brother’s a straightforward guy. I saved him twice. He’s just repaying me.”

Fine, I’ll think of it like that. The man’s dead anyways.

²⁹ 過 (guo4), meaning ‘mistake.’

³⁰ 改之 (gai3 zhi1), meaning ‘fixed.’

³¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guwen_Guanzhi

³² A line from an essay by Wang Bo (650 – 676). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tengwang_Ge_Xu, “秋水共長天一色”: translation taken from: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Teng_Wang_Ge_Xu

³³ I didn’t realise until I looked this up that “City N” is actually Nanjing! There was a dismemberment murder in 1996. The victim was a new university student at Nanjing University, Diao Meiqing. She went missing for about a week whereupon what was left of her body was found in a bag by a street cleaner. Inside the bag was about 2,000 pieces of evenly cut, cooked meat and some fingers. The case was never solved.

³⁴ May 1st, International Workers’ Day

³⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pudong>

³⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Century_Park_\(Shanghai\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Century_Park_(Shanghai))

Chapter 17

*I*t still felt like a dream when we got back home—the brat was a home

owner. Although we were both home owners, my house was in the countryside while his was in the city. It wasn't the same!

“*Ge*, I think the rental shop would make a lot more money if it was in Shanghai,” he said as he rode me. When did he learn to speak so indirectly? I laughed.

I actually considered long before him to pawn the shop and sell the house—move to Shanghai.

That place was bigger, therefore safer.

We were scared that one day the beans would spill and mom and pops wouldn't take it well. Once we were all the way out there, the chances of coming out would be a lot smaller.

The first thing my ma asked about when we went back was the origins of the house. This we already thought of ahead of time.

“Binbin saved a federal official, right? He wanted to thank Binbin so he gave him a house.” Fortunately, the elderly are easy to fool. “But, mom, you can't spread this around. The chief wants to keep it a secret.”

“I know, I got it. Wow, Binbin! This is what they call what goes around comes around!”

My pa was about to launch into his usual speech about being kind without the expectation of a reward when I interrupted. “The chief wants

us³⁷ to have it. If we don't take it, he might think we think it's not enough! This way, the chief can feel relieved. I think it's a good thing."

"Yeah, Binbin, don't pay attention to that old bag of bones. You risked your life for this house! I don't see why you shouldn't take it!" My mom was being biased again.

Then, I brought up the idea of going to Shanghai.

Ma and pa were more excited than I was.

"I wanted you to go for a long time. The big city will have lots of nice girls. You have such high expectations, never could find one you liked. Going to Shanghai will be good for you."

Binbin snickered secretly beside me. I pinched him at the waist.

"It's a good idea. Men must have high aims. You should go out and experience the world. Plus you can always come back here if you don't like it there!"

After we came back to our den, I asked Binbin, "What are you going to do after we get there? What am I going to do?"

"Me? I'll look for a job. And you? You look for girls—ah! Ouch! Damn you, Qian Jiying, pinching me again. Just you wait. Just you wait..."

Just I wait, what? Worst comes to worst, I let you fuck me. I giggled as I ran outside.

After that, it was smooth sailing.

There was nothing to be afraid of.

As long as we were together.

Therefore, I went to Shanghai to find my old classmates. The brat came with me a couple of times, too, to see if he could find a job. But he was a high-roller now, completely financially-independent. He had at least two hundred and fifty bucks a month from renting out the apartment at Century Park.

I went to City N to stock up for the last time the day before National Day and for the first time in a million years, the Shanghai-Nanjing Expressway was jammed. I should have gotten home at seven pm but I only got past Zhenjiang at nine. Coincidentally, Lin Dongfu was getting engaged on National Day so he was having a fiesta. A fiesta was none other than dinner, karaoke and then hitting the bathhouse. The brat joined in on the fun, too. He was their leader after all, so he had to show up and show off, so as to say.

However, emergencies just had to happen at a time like this. My ma called me, crying and howling, telling me that my pa fainted.

“Why’re you calling me? Call 112 emergency service!”

“I did. It’s been over ten minutes and they still haven’t come yet. What do I do? *Wahhhh*. You can’t leave me, you old bag of bones!” She started wailing!

My god. I called Binbin. The call went through but no one picked up. Was he in the bathhouse already?

Dad! I was shaking. I was afraid. I mean, you can’t be alive and not fear anything. After that, no one picked up when I called back. No one picked up when I called Binbin, either. By the time I got back at ten thirty, Binbin called, telling me to go to No. 2 Hospital.

My pa had diabetes for more than ten years and recently, he began eating off-limit foods, the result being fainting from high blood sugar. Thankfully, there were no complications. He was out of critical condition after getting some insulin.

The point is that after this incident, my mom began to think of Binbin as her real son.

According to Lin Dongfu, the little brat went out of the baths in a towel and heard his phone ringing. How strange, right? He didn’t hear it when I called but he did when my mom called.

Not even bothering with clothes, he dashed out with only the bathhouse's slippers and a bath robe. Luckily, my parent's house wasn't far. He threw my dad onto his back once he got there and left like the wind. The house was an old, non-licensed building and the alleyways were complex like a maze. No wonder the ambulance couldn't find it despite it being no more than one kilometer from the main road. He couldn't hail a taxi either when he got to the road, so the brat just hauled my dad to the hospital.

And I'd have you know, my dad was ninety kilos, exactly, on the dot. If it were me, I would have outright collapsed.

My mom had already gone soft in the knees at home. By the time she made it to the hospital, my old man was already in the emergency room. They said if he got there any later, there would have been more complications.

The brat told me that my mom grabbed his hands and kept saying: Auntie's sorry. Auntie's really sorry. My dear, I'm so sorry.

The brat thought my mom was still in shock. Why are you sorry, Auntie? He asked.

I knew why.

My mom really thought of him as her son after that.

Then, the next day, she wanted Binbin to be her godson and call her mom. After my pa left the hospital, we even had a banquet in his honour and my mom announced in front of seventy-eighty people of the Qian family, "From now on, Ding Hongmei's son, Shen Bin, will be one of us. I will be his mother, my old man here will be his father and Jiying will be his brother."

By then, familial love seemed to overpower our love.

I wondered if the little brat would listen to my ma if she didn't let him be with me

I asked him when we went home. He just wouldn't answer me. Only after a long time did he burst out laughing.

"C'mon, Qian Jiying. Are you jealous of your mom here? Or are you jealous of me?"

Probably both. I was feeling like an outsider already.

"But, I don't want you to feel guilty."

"That's why I'm extra good to them! I can't leave your side. Without you, I'm nothing."

Maybe I was thinking into it too much, but hearing him say that he can't leave me, I felt warm and reassured inside.

I can't leave his side either.

Let's just keep the elderly happy for now.

Every gay person has to face this obstacle. We didn't even have Shen Bin's side to worry about. We were fortunate enough.

Author's note

I wanted to end it here. I thought maybe, lolol, that the ending was a bit rushed and some things weren't explained well enough. Some I left it that way on purpose; there's no beauty in making it too explicit. Others I'll fill in using extras and stuff.

³⁷ Notice that Qian Jiying switches to "we" and "us" when referring to Shen Bin, as if he was a benefiter of the house too.
winkwink



Well...

Almost...

Extra

*M*y name is Liu Fen. I'm already twenty two this year—*sigh*—and I still don't have a boyfriend. But honestly, I don't even want to look for one anymore. If only I could get a sex change. It must be nice to be a man. I'd definitely be a gay man.

The love between two men is real love, I'm telling you, not something your typical husband and wife have.

Oh, I'm a high school graduate. I tried to get into university for two years after graduation but had no luck. My family might be from the countryside but we countryside people are richer than those city people. All of us owned some sort of factory or something that made sheets, pillow cases or wool and stuff. The high-quality wool shirts that they sell in Shanghai all come from our factories. And I've heard that people in Beijing wear the down jacket that we make. I promise I'm not bragging. Oh, and this place might be kind of small but we've got a few McDonald's and KFC's already. Sadly, my family isn't that well-off, but my parents only got one daughter so I'm not going to starve even if I don't get into university. And I'm not ugly or anything. I'm pretty slim. Every summer, I only eat half a watermelon for each meal. I'm really skinny. I always buy S when I go shopping for clothes—M is too loose on me. And I'm a hard worker. None of my classmates know how to knit a sweater or how to cook, but I do. I'm actually pretty cultured too. I've always liked reading

so I'm pretty progressive. I also studied Japanese before. Plus, what's the big deal with university students anyways? A lot of the university graduates just come back and earn only like sixty or seventy bucks a month, which is pretty much the same as me.

But, you know...

I'm working in a video store right now. It's not your typical video store, I mean, we have three locations. The boss says he'll make me the store manager of one! My boss is good at running the business. A lot of people come all the way to our store to rent videos. Oh yeah, our store mainly provides video rental but we also secretly sell comics and romance novels. The business is really good.

My boss is kind of related with my family. But not by blood, okay?

My boss is a university graduate, you know, not the crappy kind but the really legit kind. He's really good at English. He doesn't even need subtitles to watch the raw movies. He also graduated from our province's key high school. His family's pretty well-off, too, and he is their only son. They have a cute little building. Nowadays, they're building new things all over the place. If their land were to be bought out, they would get this really decent amount of money. His mom actually likes me a lot.

I'm actually pretty nice to him. He's pretty hot too. He might not be like 180 cm but he is at least 175. Come on, Tom Cruise is only 168 so we shouldn't be too harsh.

But I couldn't just pour myself out to him and keep being too nice to him, you know. But I think he knows my feelings. He hasn't given me any kind of sign yet. I just knew he looks down on me because I'm only a high school graduate. Like I care, hmmph! I'm going to find someone hundred times hotter, as hot as Lu Yi. Hmmph! Bet that'd make him angry.

But my boss generally treats me pretty well. I get about a hundred bucks a month and I don't have to do a lot. I even get to read romance and BL

novels for free. I swear I'm not stingy. Oh, BL? That's *danmei*. You won't understand. I won't waste my time telling you because you won't get it anyways. It's just really good, okay? Especially the ones from Japan. It's a bit smutty but it's not smut. It's art. My boss said so, that it's art. I swear the guys in there are all smoking hot—all of them are guys too! And they do some you-know-what. Hehehe. I didn't know that guys could do you-know-what. Teeheehee.

My boss didn't know why so many people wanted to borrow these manga and novels so I let him take a look at a few. He laughed at me, saying that I'd be in university if I had the same motivation for it as reading manga. Who are you kidding? How can I go to university when I always failed math? But I noticed he didn't have much of a reaction after reading it. Normally a guy would at least show something, whether it's disgust or... Anyways, they would at least say *something*. Oh, and I noticed something strange about him. I mean, wouldn't you think something is wrong with a twenty-seven year old man with a nice background who has never dated?

Oh! I remember the news report. There is one homosexual man in every ten.

But he didn't really seem like it. He liked to be clean but nothing like *that*. If only he was. Why weren't there any around me? This might be a small town but there were a lot of men. Well, Nanjing's pretty close by and I heard there's a lot around Fuzimiao.

Heehee. But recently, I've made just a small discovery. A hottie came to our shop the other day—*hehehe*—a really hot one. He must have been 180 cm and he was super fresh, a bit like Takeshi Kaneshiro. You know? Takeshi Kaneshiro? Especially the eyes. And he had a piercing on his ear. One ear had one and the other didn't. He wanted to take my boss out to

dinner and kept touching my boss here and there. Anyhow, it looked fishy to me.

Then, I told my boss's mom afterwards. I call her Auntie Qian. Auntie Qian asked me the name of the person. I told her, "I think his last name is Shen. Shen Bing? Yeah." Auntie Qian's face turned sour. She told me afterwards that guy killed someone before!

I was so shocked!

Oh my god! An assassin!

And super hot, too.

I saw him a few times after that. My boss tried to act all high-profile and avoided me. Hmmpf! You see these eyes? Twenty-twenty, I tell you! Those two were definitely up to something. It could've been illegal activities—but I didn't think so. My boss is a very straight fellow.

The most important thing is that I saw the two of them walking out from the shop one morning. Holy mackerel, have we got something here? There's only one metal bed in the shop that I've slept on before. It's so tiny, even a skinny person like me is afraid of falling. How could two sleep on it? One on top of another? Oh my god! So I went to check out the bed. My boss had taken the sheets back to wash—to destroy the evidence.

I suddenly felt a rush of energy. If this was real, he's never going to get rid of me in this lifetime! Because I got leverage!

But after that I didn't see the person come again.

Until the New Year's, that is. One second. Let me clear my throat and drink some tea.

See, it was quite a coincidence. I'd planned to go back home in the countryside for New Year's but then my dad and mom moved out to the town. We bought a small apartment in town and kept it empty the whole time. We only moved in this year. So, I had to watch the shop for my boss. No breaks even during New Year's. But he gave me double pay—he still

had some good in him. Oh yeah, that's right. It was the fourth day of the new year³⁸. I have a really good memory. So, um, my boss called me (on my cell!). I have a cell phone that can send Chinese text messages. My boss wanted me to buy some medicine and food and bring it over to his new place. It was so weird. I wanted to ask some more when he went crazy on me, telling me not to tell Auntie and if I did, he'd kick me out. How could he be so mean? I only watch the shop for him. I'm not his nanny.

In the end, I brought the things over. I'm just a nice person. Then, when he opened the door, I'd only leaned my neck over a bit and he started yelling at me. He said, "It's your sister-in-law inside. You're welcome to say hi!"

Hmmph. Never try to prove what nobody doubts. I hadn't thought much but I grew suspicious after he said that.

Then, I got up really early the next morning. I didn't go to see him on purpose. I was just passing by his neighbourhood when I saw that hottie that I hadn't seen for a long time leaving on a taxi. And he had come out from the building where my boss's place was!

Not that long after, my boss came running out, wearing cotton pjs and indoor slippers. It was obvious he was chasing after someone. You should've seen how frustrated he was—as if someone stole four hundred bucks from him.

I just knew something was going on with them.

After the holiday season, the hottie came back. My boss also went missing for a few days before that. He had even closed the shop. My boss always said that the Qian Jr's Video Store does not close, in storm or in hail, during holidays or breaks. But just look at him! He closed the shop and just left, and even told Auntie that he was going to stock up on videos.

He was just lying to her just because she's old. I mean, there are no videos out there. You just call and order it if you wanted some.

Something was fishy!

After he came back, the hottie started watching the shop for us.

So I started testing him. First, I showed him some *danmei* novels and gave him an especially intense one for him to read. He went to the backroom and read in private while giggling the whole time. I have no idea what he was laughing about. Then, he came back out and asked me if I had anymore. I said there are a lot where that came from. Hmmph, I hadn't even given him my most favourite, most awesome one to read. The ones that Japanese people wrote are the most you-know-what. I didn't even give those to him. He then asked me if I've read any and I said I have. He stared at me like I was a monster and then asked me, "You don't think it's gross?"

"Are you kidding me," I told him, "This is real love. Tons of people read this. It's very popular right now."

He reacted as if I had told the funniest joke. When my boss came back, he showed the book to my boss. The two of them went to the backroom. I snuck by to eavesdrop and I heard something like "it's just bullshit." Do you know how many young souls you just smothered right there? After that, I didn't hear much from my boss but the hottie kept laughing his ass off. Then, I heard three words.

He said, "Let's try it."

"Let's try it"!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

They came back out and the hottie asked, "Ah-Fen, why's your face so red?" I didn't even know what to say.

The two of them became even more obvious to me. The two of them would always touch each other when they had nothing on their hands. To other people, they were good friends of course, but to me, that was not the

case. It was so suggestive. And what kind of friend touches their friend's thighs?! The hottie could cook, too. I saw with my own two eyes the other day I went over to Auntie's house to eat. My boss squeezed his butt when he was cooking!

How could that be? The hottie was blushing too.

Poor me.

I don't even have anyone to tell.

Sigh.

I think about those two every day. I decided that I want to support them, give them strength and my best blessings.

They must be "real love". Think about it. An assassin, a super hot one, working at a video store. Oh my, oh my. It's real love. It's remarkable.

How come my boss is so lucky? He's not that good-looking and yet, he fished himself such a hottie—an assassin too!

How come I have no such luck? If only I can become a man. I'd definitely be a ton times better than my boss. I'm really not bragging when I say the hottie and I are super-duper close now. I told him my pay's not that high and he talked to the boss for me. The boss raised my pay by twelve bucks. He's just so nice.

Also, the most important thing I know you want to ask me is which one of the two is the *uke* and which is the *seme*. Heehee. Based on my observations, the probability of a young *seme* is very high. See, he's an assassin while my boss is only a wisp of a man. Plus, he's a lot shorter than the hottie. It's the classic *toshishita seme*³⁹ situation. But I don't think my boss's butt is that perky and his waist circumference is 29 inches. Tsk tsk, he still needs to lose some weight. Still not pretty enough.

But, this kind of *uke* is pretty popular right now. A lot of books have them. My boss is pretty nice and he has a good temper. Sometimes he's a bit slow but he acts smart. But really—heehee—I think ever since I knew

he's the *uke*, I've stopped being mad. Obviously being the *uke* is better than finding a woman. Hmm, that hottie, though. If only my future boyfriend is half as hot as he is.

³⁸ January 27th, 2001.

³⁹ A Japanese term meaning 'younger seme.'



Well...

We are near it...

But not yet again!!

Epilogue – 10 Years (with Shen Bin)

I'm Shen Bin.

I've known Ah-ge for ten years now.

I'm twenty-eight and Ah-ge is already thirty-four, hahaha.

We're in Shanghai now, living a good life and making a shit ton of money. We never thought ten years ago that we'd get to where we are today. Shanghai's been developing so quick, thank god I got out early. If I stayed in there for ten years, I'd be a moldy piece of junk who doesn't know what the hell is going on.

I didn't know for a long time that Ah-ge wrote this thing and that it's about us. It was the girl from the store, Ah-Fen, who told me about it!

She's in Shanghai, too. She's married now and her kid's growing up too, but she's still reading BL or whatever—the you-know-what kind. She even made a bunch of lady-friends who always come to the store acting all suspicious.

But I guess they come to look at me.

The super hot stud, duh!

We've been through a lot these years and Ah-ge's still going on blind dates. *Sigh.*

But there's been less and less because everyone knows he's picky. Muma⁴⁰ told me to talk him into lowering his expectations and told me to lower mine, too.

It's a hard situation.

Okay, I'll start from the top. I only have a junior high education so please bear with me here.

The year 2000, Ah-ge and I came to Shanghai together. At that time, the area around Century Park was just like the wilderness. The houses were nice but not very hospitable. We decided we couldn't live there so we rented out the blank house and rented a place by Dongchang Road, near Yaohan. They were all old state-owned buildings, a lot like the villages back home. We were on the sixth floor. The bottom floors all had security grilles on the windows and made it look pretty much like a jail.

We rented a two room, semi-furnished, for two hundred a month. Adding on the rent from the house by Century Park, we earned about seventy bucks a month.

I learned a bit about computers when I was in the slammer, but really it wasn't anything major. Computers change really fast. One year it was still 586 but then the next year it was Celeron and Pentium. I figured it was a good business. A computer that cost eight hundred bucks only lasts you a year or two before a newer generation comes out—it's almost like fashion, right?

The computer section in Yaohan had just opened at the time and I first worked at a branch of a brand name store. After I got myself familiar with the place, I found a few people and started to assemble parts and sell pirated cell phones along with it. It made good dough.

Ah-ge's luck turned for the better after meeting me, hahaha, he just doesn't wanna admit it.

His major isn't very hot on the market but there was the Shanghai Skilled Worker Program or whatever at the time and university grads were valuable. He was pretty good with English so he found a biotech company headquartered in Hubei with a location in Shanghai through a classmate. But at the old age he was (lol) —which was true, there's no use giving me those looks—he only made, like, two hundred fifty dollars a month as a beginner associate. I mean, I was much better off just selling pirated phones.

But Ah-ge wasn't interested in that. He wanted a job just to get a registry in Shanghai⁴¹. I on the other hand got a blue-stamp⁴² because of the house. He worked hard for half a year before going back to his comfort zone and opening a video store here.

Shanghai is such a big place and rush hour is horrific. There's not many people who got the time to rent videos. They usually just buy it. It's different from how it is back home. The same goes for books and manga, too. I didn't even know where those kids get so much cash. They're such spenders. It wasn't until later that I found out that the farmers in Pudong are just stinking rich. Ask anyone you see on the street and they'll have a few houses from having their land bought out.

Ah-ge found a small store front downstairs to sell videos. The business wasn't that great at first but somehow it boomed. He's definitely talented in these things, haha.

It was after we lived there for a year or two when I went to collect rent that I saw a huge parade of cars heading to the new development just next door. Turns out it was a group of real estate shoppers from Wenzhou⁴³, buying out hundred-thousand-dollar houses like it was nothing.

I told Ah-ge after going home. He kept turning and tossing that night and didn't behave in bed either. Later, he decided to sell the shops and the house back home and buy houses in Shanghai.

Haha, pretty good intuition, huh.

Ever since then, Ah-ge has been completely immersed in buying and selling property. He'd ride his stupid old bike around and about the neighbourhoods. Starting from Century Park, to Huamu⁴⁴, Sanlin⁴⁵, Yangpu⁴⁶ and Minhang⁴⁷, he practically looked through every alleyway.

We made some calculations last night. We can retire ahead of time!

All in all, Ah-ge, the educated one in the family, makes a bit more than me. But he is Ah-ge after all!

Ah-Fen married a small business owner in '02 and came to Shanghai, too, to help out at the store. Her husband and I work together with computers and the partnership is going well.

Ah-Fen is still kinda weird and wacky. Her daughter's already three and she's still watching inappropriate videos, all from Japan, too. Thankfully, I'm a good person and I keep her secret for her.

She always hogs the computer when she watches the store and goes on this pink-themed forum, scrolling through it endlessly every waking minute of the day (and night!). Sometimes she'd even grin with her pearly whites all showing—creepy! I think she made a few internet friends, saying that she's getting business for the store. Then, a few girls showed up at the store. There was a master's student too. She looked pretty cute but I don't think Ah-ge fell for her. If he dare...hmmph! I'll make sure he says goodbye to his little friend!

Ah, screw it. If I did that I'd suffer too. I'll torture him. No, that's too much. Oh well, he'll never change anyways!

We're the kind that's been through hell and back!

Anyways, back to the story of those little girls, they hid it pretty well but I could tell right away. They came into the store and kept staring at me and Ah-ge.

The hell you looking at?

Ah-ge's really slow with these things and didn't give a damn and kept doing his research on real estate. I had to take care of my computer business too, so I had to go. Surprisingly, two of them followed me!

Dayum!

Am I that hot?

Hahahahaha.

When I got to the computer section, the girls asked me for fake Samsung phones while staring at my neck without even blinking. I thought I must've had something on my neck.

They kept looking until I felt a bit creeped out. But you see, I've started a new life for so long and my temper got a lot better. I went to the restroom to look in the mirror and it turned out I had a red mark on my collarbone. It's all Ah-ge, kissing me like crazy the previous night.

I was a bit weirded out.

What's going on in the girls' heads nowadays? Thank god I didn't have to marry one.

After, the girls came to hang out a lot and we got to know each other. A few of them are pretty close with Ah-ge, always discussing some writing. I felt a bit down and wondered what Ah-ge was writing behind my back.

But honestly, I've thought through it. I might say I'm gonna do this and that if he had a change of hearts, but I'm just a damned nobody while he's the only son of the Qian family. Muma and Jiye (godfather) both really want to have a grandchild.

If a girl is what it takes, I'd be okay with that, really...

I brought this up the other day and Ah-ge's face just went sour.

He turned into a monster at night and I couldn't even get up the next morning. Do not try this at home, kids.

My Ah-ge is very fierce to start with. He might look skinny and he might be shorter than me, but he dared go up against Brother. Of course, it was for me...

I'll always remember.

I'll be with someone who'd do that for me for as long as I'm alive.

So I gotta live on and listen to him, not go down the wrong path, not fight and not curse—be the model gay man of the new century.

Even if he gets married. I won't complain.

His son will be my son.

But I won't tell him this. I'll just keep it inside.

He always says that love is dedication. If he got married while liking me, that'd be unfair for the girl.

I'm happy when I hear that. There's actually tons of people out there who has a mistress or maybe two or three or four mistresses. Ah-ge is one of the last men on earth. A real man.

I was right about him.

My intuition is much better than Ding Hongmei, I mean, my ma.

We're bringing Muma and Jiye to Shanghai for New Year's this year. Lin Dongfu and the gang are coming too.

It's actually been ten years.

So much has happened in ten years, but it seems fast to me, a lot faster than the eighteen years before that. I just feel joy and happiness everyday. I haven't forgotten about the past—being bullied and killing people—but it has really just passed by.

And it'll just keep passing by.

Lin Dongfu, the little shit, he stopped selling motorcycles and started selling Japanese cars back home and made a ton of money. He who used to do the worst in school actually got married with a teacher from the provincial high. An English teacher! And the other guys, one of them

opened a poultry shop and another is driving for a long-distance coach service. All are doing pretty good.

I really like watching a few of the rated films that Ah-ge has. I can't pronounce the names but they're awesome. It's like reliving the days of my youth.

In the last ten years, Ah-ge's idol jumped down from the twenty-fourth floor and Ah-ge started a gay blog as is the popular trend. But I'm not gay, I just like Ah-ge.

⁴⁰ 姆媽 (mu3 ma1) is mom in the Wu language which is spoken in Shanghai, Zhejiang and Jiangsu.

⁴¹ Your residency registry is very hard to change. Having your registry at a certain city makes life better. For example, local residents pay different rates of tuition, telephone, hydro and property tax. You must apply for certain documents such as ID card in the place of your registry. In general, having your registry at a big city (like Shanghai) is valued very highly because it makes you a true "city-person." For more information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hukou_system

⁴² A special type of registry with a blue stamp (thus called blue-stamp). Holders of this receive the same treatment as the regular registry holders in certain areas like education and business licensing. This type of registry has fallen out of use and many cities have stopped providing them. This was used as an incentive to promote the commercial real estate industry as this registry came along with the purchase of property. Having a blue-stamp in one city doesn't mean the regular registry in one's hometown is cancelled.

⁴³ There is a stereotype about Wenzhou people. They are said to all be great entrepreneurs and make a lot of money.

⁴⁴ Huamu is a subdistrict in the Pudong district in Shanghai.

⁴⁵ Sanlin is a town in Shanghai.

⁴⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yangpu_District

⁴⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minhang_District



Author's note

*After so many years, I wrote a short epilogue for the New Year's.
Because Shen Bin is the narrator, I became a bit wordy and couldn't
describe things that well.*

The two are very happy.

Report over!

Author's note (2015)

*I never knew that there was someone who was translating danmei novels
for people outside the country. I wonder how my words sound translated
into English, but nonetheless, I feel very honoured. This story was not
published like my other works but this is also the story that is based on my
home, on the people around me, and on the true Jiangnan of China. I hope
those who read this short story written by this small author can get to know
more about this place. I believe that love, in fact, has no boundaries in this
world of ours. May you all find happiness.*

